



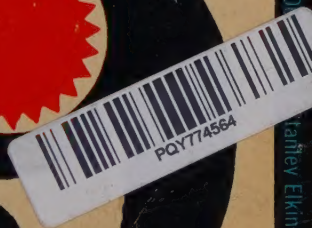
BALLANTINE BOOKS. 75¢

Donald Hutter • Henia Karmel-Wolfe

THE BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES

1065

Edited by Martha Foley



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Jay Neugeboren • Daniel D. • Hatley Elkin • Jack Gitchrist • James W. Greshong • Martin J. Hanner • Maureen Howard

From the *Chicago Tribune* "Books Today" review:

"After reading, with steady satisfaction, 'The Best American Short Stories 1965' I began to wonder how many of the annual editions of this series I had read in the past. Not all, surely; but many more than half of the approximately 50 volumes to date. And I can't remember ever reading a single volume without feeling a sense of gratitude that the series existed, as a permanently available repository for carefully selected good short fiction.

I don't mean that, looking back, I think of each year's anthology as equally rewarding to read. Over the years there have been understandable variations in the volumes as a whole just as in each volume there is an understandable variation in the quality of the individual stories reprinted. But the series deserves praise; and this 1965 collection of 22 stories deserves, I think, special praise.

It is a most honorable collection. Its stories, differing widely in subject matter, technique, tone and effect, maintain a remarkable consistency of excellence. There is nothing second-rate here. Every piece shows its own fine integrity. And all of them do what good stories must do: they share thru words some stretch of human experience, so that it becomes, vicariously, the reader's own.

Naturally, I like some of the pieces better than others. But each reader has a right to his own preferences; and this book won't permit any very serious quarreling about particular stories because all of them are—each in its own way—so satisfying.

I was struck first of all by the work of writers already familiar to me. I found 'The Tea Time of Stouthearted Ladies,' by Jean Stafford, 'There,' by Peter Taylor, 'A Sacrifice,' by Isaac Bashevis Singer, 'The Visit,' by Elizabeth Spencer, and 'Heart of Gold,' by Mary Lavin all standing up as fine, sturdy, honorable, and memorable stories. What I did miss in this 1965 collection was Martha Foley's customary annual introduction, which is usually a brief commentary on the year in terms of short fiction. But I noted that the usual proportion of stories from big and little magazines has been pretty well maintained.

Ten of the choices are from well-known magazines of national circulation, with the *Saturday Evening Post* all by itself furnishing a notable half of them, and the *Atlantic Monthly* offering two. Twelve of the stories were first published in admirable magazines which unfortunately do not have large circulations or widely known reputations among the general reading public. Of these, *The Prairie Schooner* and *The Hudson Review* both provide three pieces, and *The Kenyon Review* two."

Richard Sullivan

**The
Best
American
Short
Stories
1965**

and the Yearbook of the American Short Story

Edited by
Martha Foley

BALLANTINE BOOKS



NEW YORK

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CONTENTS

CENTER OF GRAVITY. <i>L. J. Amster</i> From <i>The Saturday Evening Post</i>	11
THE RETURNING. <i>Daniel De Paola</i> From <i>Prairie Schooner</i>	57
THE TRANSIENT. <i>Stanley Elkin</i> From <i>The Saturday Evening Post</i>	69
OPENING DAY. <i>Jack Gilchrist</i> From <i>The Georgia Review</i>	105
THE GESTURE. <i>James W. Groshong</i> From <i>The Antioch Review</i>	112
SARAH. <i>Martin J. Hamer</i> From <i>The Atlantic Monthly</i>	127
SHERRY. <i>Maureen Howard</i> From <i>The Hudson Review</i>	139
A FAMILY MAN. <i>Donald Hutter</i> From <i>The Saturday Evening Post</i>	183
THE MONTH OF HIS BIRTHDAY. <i>Henia Karmel-Wolfe</i> From <i>Mademoiselle</i>	203
HEART OF GOLD. <i>Mary Lavin</i> From <i>The New Yorker</i>	214
A BLUE BLONDE IN THE SKY OVER PENNSYLVANIA. <i>Dennis Lynds</i> From <i>The Hudson Review</i>	239
THE GUEST. <i>Frederic Morton</i> From <i>The Hudson Review</i>	257

THE APPLICATION. <i>Jay Neugeboren</i>	267
From <i>The Transatlantic Review</i>	
FIRST VIEWS OF THE ENEMY.	275
<i>Joyce Carol Oates</i>	
From <i>Prairie Schooner</i>	
THE PRACTICE OF AN ART.	287
<i>Leonard Wallace Robinson</i>	
From <i>The Saturday Evening Post</i>	
A SACRIFICE. <i>Isaac Bashevis Singer</i>	299
From <i>Harper's Magazine</i>	
ESKIMO PIES. <i>Robert Somerlott</i>	306
From <i>The Atlantic Monthly</i>	
THE VISIT. <i>Elizabeth Spencer</i>	314
From <i>Prairie Schooner</i>	
THE TEA TIME OF STOUTHEARTED LADIES. <i>Jean Stafford</i>	328
From <i>The Kenyon Review</i>	
FOR I HAVE WEPT. <i>Gerald Stein</i>	341
From <i>The Saturday Evening Post</i>	
THERE. <i>Peter Taylor</i>	361
From <i>The Kenyon Review</i>	
THE LAST RITE. <i>Lee Yu-Hwa</i>	388
From <i>The Literary Review</i>	
Biographical Notes	403
The Yearbook of the American Short Story, January 1 to December 31, 1964	409
Distinctive Short Stories in American Magazines, 1964	411

Center of Gravity

L. J. Amster

THE railroad yard bull squinted closely at the picture on the card that said I was licensed to box in Illinois.

"This you, boy?"

"Uh-huh."

The picture showed me when my nose was freshly broken and swollen across the hollow on each side, and the photographer, while setting up his camera, had warned me not to smile if I meant to use it on a license. That photographer was a champion. He was careful about the smiling but placed me in front of a flowery chintz drape, and when the picture was developed I looked as if I were wearing a large white flower behind my right ear.

"It does favor you some," the yard bull said. "Reckon it is you, awright."

"Usually I take a better picture."

"Well now," he said. "Funny you bein' a fighter. My name's Crumbaugh. I run the fights down to the opera house in Balmoral. Reckon you in shape to fight tomorrow evenin'?"

"Tomorrow? What about this?"

We were standing in the back room of a barbershop in a gritty railroad town where the barber served as the justice of the peace, and I was waiting to be tried for trespassing on railroad property.

Now the justice of the peace sat at a scarred, rolltop desk and wrote on a printed form. Under his close-cropped, iron-gray hair, the skin was speckled. He finished writing with a flourish that upset a soapy shaving

brush on the desk. He wiped the desk with his sleeve and looked up.

"Well now, Andy," the justice of the peace said.

The yard bull said, "He's charged like that other boy."

The justice of the peace slapped the desk, and his metallic-looking head trembled. "Sergeant Crumbaugh, you know the law same's me. Now you charge this prisoner right and proper. Like he was arrested separate and by hisself."

"Awright, Judge. Awright. I charge this prisoner with trespassing. I arrested him off a gondola car on Train 119 on the bridge between here and Balmoral."

"Well now," the justice of the peace said. "That's the right way to do." He pointed the shaving brush at me. "How you pleading, boy?"

"...."

"Ten days." He became a barber again. "Now you all git. I got a customer waiting in the chair."

The barber went out, and Crumbaugh stepped in front of me. He pushed his long, pinched face forward. "Wait up, boy. About tomorrow evenin'. I got a boy coming over from Ridgeview Arsenal; reckon you and him weigh about the same."

"You know where I'll be."

"Well now," he said. "The sheriff and me are real good buddies. I reckon he'll let you out to fight."

He followed me to the door. "I'll call him while you on your way up there."

Outside, a van was waiting. A tall character, shaped like an elongated diamond, with narrow, muscular shoulders and a small, square face, leaned against the side of the van and picked absently at something in the palm of one hand. He wore a badge, a shoulder holster and gun, sunglasses and a baseball cap. I guessed he was a deputy sheriff.

When he saw us, the deputy pushed the cap back on his head and scratched his forehead. "Time you was inside, I thought you giving this boy a regular jury trial."

"Now, Dero," Crumbaugh said. His jaws, which were fastened far back on his head, loosened in a wide smile. "We wasn't no time at all." He caught my arm as I was

climbing into the van. "I'll be up to see the sheriff myself. First thing tomorrow."

The deputy stood aside. "Come on, boy. We ain't got all day."

I entered the van. The Negro with whom I had shared the gondola in silence through the previous night sat on a bench on one side. He was a broad-shouldered, squat citizen and now he sat calmly, his large hands over his knees, looking like someone who was going to a job he didn't like but could do as well as anyone.

"We just missed having a crowd," I said.

"Umh. Those fellers in the cars near the end of the train was close to the other side of the bridge."

"Lucky us. We were in the middle."

"You tellin' me. We couldn't go nowheres. 'Less we had us a pair of wings. That bridge is eighty feet down. I know that bridge. I worked on it to build it."

"Your home around here?" I said it in a way he understood. Home was a point of departure.

"Not lately. Where's your home?"

"Home is where I hang my head."

"Yeah," he said. "Where you from mostly?"

"Chicago," I said. "Mostly Chicago."

I couldn't tell whether he was thinking about it, and soon he began to sing softly:

*"Oh, you rob me of my silver,
You rob me of my gol'.
I'll be damn'
If you rob me
Of my soul . . .*

*"Love, o love, o careless love,
Love, o love, o careless love,
Love, o love,
O careless love,
O you see
What love has done to me . . ."*

He sang it all the way to the jail, and I settled back, my eyes closed, measuring the length of the ride by the number of verses and choruses. He sang clearly and with dignity, like a man who is often alone and his own judge,

sounding the notes truly and sliding off into a minor tone that came up from a time and place long past and suggested something beyond the actual meaning of the words.

It must have been fourteen verses and choruses from the barbershop to the Onager County jail, a square structure of great rough-hewn stone blocks. Wind, weather and time had scored the surface of the stone and left flecks sticking out like barnacles.

The deputy ordered us inside the building. We entered the office, where an old man who limped crookedly received us. The old man was the turnkey. He had a growth on his face that made him look as if he carried a ball of tobacco in his mouth.

The deputy said, "They all yours, Bubber."

The turnkey nodded toward a narrow door behind him. "Sheriff's in the hopper, Dero," he said.

We heard the sound of a sudden rush of water. The narrow door was thrown open, and a character several inches taller than the tall deputy and wider in the hips came toward us. He was an older version of the deputy, and his small, square face hung protected between his shoulders.

The sheriff looked at me. "You the boy Crumbaugh was tellin' about?"

"Him and Crumbaugh appeared to be plottin' something," the deputy said. "Maybe a jailbreak."

The turnkey thought that was a funny notion and laughed, causing the growth on his face to jiggle loosely.

The sheriff said, "You best go on home now, Dero. Clarice is waitin' on you."

"Yah. Got to take her by the doctor's," the deputy said. He scratched his head through the baseball cap. "Be back after a while, I reckon." He turned to go out, ducking his head through the doorway.

The sheriff pointed to the Negro and told the turnkey, "Take him in, Bubber."

When we were alone, the sheriff settled himself deliberately in a swivel chair and stretched his long legs. He stared at his shoes.

"Tell me you a fighter," he said. He lifted his head and examined me. "How long you been fightin', boy?"

"About three years."

He was skeptical. "You ain't got the marks."

"I don't want 'em."

"When you fight last?"

"A week ago."

He raised one leg and dropped it over the other. But he didn't ask about that fight and it was just as well. That one wasn't a fight at all but another one of those things.

My opponent had been a local favorite, a young farmer with thick, plowman's shoulders and awkward, heavy legs. It was his seventh fight and he had won each time before. The matchmaker, his cousin, was very hopeful about the boy's prospects and spoke of taking him to New York sometime soon.

After the first round, I let him set the pace, but he was weary and moved slowly. He pawed tiredly at my face but didn't land a blow. I knew I had to work quickly. In the third round I moved in fast, caught a punch on my glove and fell to the floor, and he was too tired to show surprise. But it would look good in his record. I was a fighter from a big city.

Later, in the dressing room, the matchmaker gave me some money and waited till I counted it.

"That's right, ain't it?" he said. "Fifteen dollars."

"Tell you what. Give me another fin and you can have my stuff too." The ring clothes lay on a chair. "Five bucks. For the shoes, trunks, mouthpiece, jock, towel and bag." I held up the satiny blue trunks so he could see the white, six-pointed star stitched to the left leg. "I'll throw in the star too."

"What's that?"

"It's for good luck. The Star of David. A family heirloom."

"You say five dollars?"

He paid me and hurriedly pushed the clothes into the bag. His hurry was unnecessary. I wasn't going to change my mind.

That was a week ago.

The sheriff said, "Andy Crumbaugh says you wanna go down to Balmoral."

"He said you might let me go."

"I'm thinkin' about it," he said, and looked thoughtful.

"If I do let you go, it ain't for good and all. You comin' back here to finish your time."

"It's only ten days, Sheriff. I can count ten days."

"Yah. You figure you in good shape to fight?"

"More or less."

"This boy Crumbaugh's fixin' for you to fight is mighty rough. Seen him fight a time or two. Corporal Valiant."

"It might be a good fight."

But the sheriff seemed worried. "What I'm thinkin' about is if you was to get hurt real bad. I'd be in trouble."

"Umm . . ."

"Yah. You may be just a plain damn fool," the sheriff said. "Now you let me tell you somethin'. A while ago we had a boy here claimed to be a fighter. The old sheriff went and took this boy down to Roxburgh. Well, this boy got a bad knock on the head and he died. . . . Still," he said, "I sure'd like to take you down there."

"It's up to you, Sheriff."

"Well now, I got to make up my mind. I'll let you know in time."

"OK."

"Meanwhile," he said, "you rest up good. If you do go down there, I want you to put on a good show for them folks."

He shifted in his chair and called out, "Say, Bubber!"

The barred door swung inward and the turnkey stood in the opening. "He ready?"

"Yah."

I entered a large, rectangular room with two rows of cells, one above the other, fitted into three walls. The far wall was given over to a pair of tall, barred windows. On the left, a stairway led to the catwalk halfway up the walls. At a table in the middle of the room, some men sat huddled and doing nothing. They looked up briefly and without recognition.

I said, "This is a pretty old building, eh?"

"It's old but it ain't pretty," the turnkey said. "More'n a hundred and seventy years, I reckon. Sign out front, tell you all about it, time you leave here."

"A lot of history."

"Yah. You take the end cell up there."

"What time do you feed in here?"

"Not till mornin' now."

"Can I get something from outside? I'll pay for it."

"Got to ask the sheriff, boy. You come down in a little bit."

I climbed the stairway and went along the catwalk to my cell, which was open like all the others. The door was a solid wooden slab, frozen against the wall, and its hinges were thick with rust. It looked like a lot of history, all right.

The only light in the cell came from a single bulb near the ceiling, which gave off a dull glow. There were two narrow cots, each with a thin mattress and a dark cotton blanket. The bedding smelled strongly of disinfectant. I didn't like the smell but it reassured me. No bug could hold out against anything that smelled like that.

I tried to move one of the cots away from the cold-sweating wall, but it was held in place by a metal band bolted to the floor. Scabs of rust covered the frame, and they broke under the pressure of my grip.

Then I heard footsteps on the catwalk behind me, and a shadow darkened the cell. I turned around. A citizen about my age stood in the doorway. He wore a bright yellow sweat shirt, and his long blond hair hung down over his forehead. His lips were turned out and he seemed to be laughing, but there was no humor in his face.

"What you fixin' to do?" he asked.

"Trying to rearrange the furniture. To make it more homey."

"Hah." He tossed his head, and the hair fell like a tassel.

"How long you gonna be here?"

"Ten days."

He pressed his lips together and seemed to be pouting.

"Of course, if I like it here I may stay longer," I said.

He blew out his breath. "Ten days. I could do that on my ear now," he said. "I been here eight months."

"Yeah?"

"Been a-waitin' on a trial."

"What for?"

"I done shot a feller." He said it calmly, but it didn't sound like an accident.

He inclined his head toward the cell next to mine and said, "This here's where I stay."

I looked in. His cell had more light. There was a pink-colored gooseneck lamp on a low table beside a framed picture of a flat-faced girl. A second picture of the girl hung on the wall over his bed, which was furnished with sheets and an encased pillow. I saw a bench, an electric grill and what looked like a box of canned foods.

"All the comforts," I said. "Is that your girl?"

"My wife. I made them pitchers. Hand-painted 'em."

"Umm?"

"That's the line I follow—artist."

He told me his name was Harrington. He was a Virginian and until his arrest had worked in a factory where they made religious articles. It was a large place, Harrington told me, and employed more than 400 people. It was owned by a man named Koch. Harrington didn't mind being in jail so long as the sheriff let his wife come to see him every weekend. He believed his lawyer would get him out.

I said, "I've got to go down to see the turnkey."

"What's your name?"

"Benjamin. John Benjamin."

"What kind of name is that? What nationality?"

"Cafeterian," I said. "Like Jeff Davis's boy, Judah Benjamin."

"Huh?"

"It's history."

Going down the stairs, my shoes made a loud clatter, but none of the men at the table looked up. Each one sat as if apart, measuring his personal time by the pulsebeats in his temple. Their faces were leaden, like lids that covered some highly inflammable secret longing. They gazed at the barred door as though they expected it to open suddenly and leave them unguarded so they could rush out wildly to make a life or destroy one.

The Negro with whom I had been arrested stood alone at the side of the room, next to a radiator. When he saw me coming, his face opened in a broad grin that lighted up his dark skin.

"How you makin' it?" he asked.

"So far it's a draw. You hungry?"

"Well," he said, "I ain't hongry, rightly enough. But I could eat a little somethin' to keep from *gettin'* hongry."

"Good enough. I'm trying to ding the turnkey into buying me some food outside. He's got to ask the sheriff if it's OK. Go on up to my cell and wait, huh? It's the last one on this side."

I noticed that he was looking past me, and I turned. I saw a guy leaning against the wall beside the window, and he stared hard at me. His face tightened like a fist and he worked his mouth as if to spit.

"He looks unhappy," I said.

"That's one thing sure."

The other man twisted his face angrily. I waited, watching him. He wore tight-fitting denims, Western boots and a wide belt which was drawn through a heavy buckle. His fingers played with the buckle, and I looked at it. I saw the embossed steer's head and the word TEXAS.

"Let's go," I said to the Negro. "That character needs a lot of room for his misery."

"Yeah man," the Negro said. "He's gonna need all this world and the next one too."

As we walked together to the stairway, I whistled "The Eyes of Texas," but it went unnoticed. I went on to the barred door. On the other side, the turnkey sat at the desk and teased a mongrel dog with a bone. Each time the dog tried to get the bone, the turnkey slapped its muzzle sharply and the animal cringed, crawling backward under the desk. Then the turnkey made another attempt to lure the dog from its shelter.

"You speak to the sheriff?" I asked.

"Hold up, boy," the turnkey said. I didn't know whether he meant the order for me or the dog. Finally he dropped the bone, but the dog would not leave its safe place under the desk. The turnkey stood up and came toward me, carrying a parcel wrapped in a sheet of newspaper. He pressed the grease-stained package between the bars.

"Sheriff told me to give you this here couple-three sandwiches."

"Thanks."

"You lucky bein' here, boy," the turnkey said. "Sheriff Burden ain't a hard man like some."

"Tell him I appreciate it."

He went back to his chair, picked up the bone and resumed his game with the dog.

I tucked the parcel under my arm and headed for the stairway and went up. The Negro was waiting for me on the catwalk. I asked him to come in, and he followed but remained standing.

"Sit down," I said.

I opened the package and found four crudely made sandwiches, fatty lumps of meat between halves of cold biscuit.

"Ah, Southern cooking."

"Southern cooking ain't bad," the Negro said, "if you got the food to go with it."

"Compliments of Sheriff Burden." I tore the paper and divided the food. "He's a real good buddy," I said.

"He's a new one, I reckon. The other sheriff, he was a little bitty man, could sit on a dime and let his feet hang. A matchbox could hold his clothes."

The cold, gristly meat took some strenuous chewing. I looked down at the piece of newspaper near my hand and read an advertisement. It said that Onager County was 250 years old and would celebrate its anniversary at the annual fair. The advertiser, a company which manufactured surgical appliances, hoped that the coming anniversary would begin another 250 years of happy prosperity for everyone in the county.

I got the last bite of food down, swallowed convulsively and massaged my throat. "Need something to wash this down," I said.

"Yeah man. I'm dry as a wooden god."

We crossed the tier to the washroom and drank from one of the taps. Then we went back to my cell and sat down. He offered me his sack of tobacco.

"Roll one for me," I said.

He tapped some of the dry, brown grains into a paper trough and sealed it with a quick, rolling motion of thumb and forefinger. Then he held it up. "You wet the edge."

I ran the tip of my tongue along the edge of the paper and he pasted it down. He twisted the end of the paper and gave me the cigarette. Then he made another for himself and struck a match.

He drew on his cigarette and let thin wisps of smoke curl around his face. A vague smile of memory touched his mouth and went away. He moved his lips as if trying them before speaking. "Not to change the subject," he said. "I been to Chicago. Went up there one time just to see and be seen. Onliest time in my life I wasn't workin' or scufflin', one."

"You hit the number?"

"Nothin' like that. I stayed in Chicago with a real fine lady. But I reckon all that high livin' got too rich for my blood. I was bound to do something devilish." He waited for the full memory to return. "We was out walking one evening and she meet a lady friend name of Bella. This Bella shake my hand and say, 'Mister Cicero! Oh yeah. I heard a lot about you.' Right then I knowed it was gonna be a mess."

"Careless love."

"I'm tellin' you in front. That's the truth." He hummed the melody, warming it for a moment. Then his mouth opened and he sang:

*"Oh, when you wear yo' apron high,
Oh, when you wear yo' apron high,
Oh, when you wear
Yo' apron high,
I can see
That love ain't passed you by . . ."*

I listened, thinking that he sang like a man who had been sick beyond hope and was getting well. Suddenly the light overhead flickered and stopped burning altogether. We went out to the catwalk and looked around. All the cells were dark. But there was a light burning in the washroom and two more in the high ceiling above the cell block.

"Must mean it's bedtime," he said. "Reckon ol' Bones got to go down and get some winks."

"Take it easy, Cicero."

"I got to take it easy. This bein' a ten-day detour and all."

"Good night."

"You be good to yourself, now."

I went into the cell and undressed and made a pillow of my clothes. But the smell of disinfectant was like a steel probe in my nostrils and I blinked wakefully.

A ten-day detour, Cicero had said. All on the same ticket, at no extra cost. Well, I've got it to do. And when it's done it'll be all done. Ten days I could account for. If I could do as much for the rest of my time.

I lay back, thinking of sleep, but it would not come. The reason was plain. A body in motion tends to remain so. It was someone's law. And I had been in motion, moving like someone in flight, and gathering momentum. Now it was piled up inside me, making a quiet turmoil like a bunch of feathers in an electrically charged cylinder.

I thought of sleep again, lying motionless, and finally it came. But the movement of something on my legs stirred me a little and I heard a thin, harsh, sniffing sound. I raised up and awakened instantly and completely.

A large rat stood on the bed, facing me casually and unafraid, like a familiar and docile pet. I went rigid. The rat tensed and braced itself, and I pulled up my knees. The rat scabbled to retain its footing, and I bent over the side of the cot and picked up a shoe. The rat leaped as I threw the shoe and struck the soft body, turning it in midair. It twisted and dropped to the floor and fled from the cell. It nearly overran the catwalk, scrambled to a stop and dodged away to the left toward the wall. I jumped down and ran after it, but the rat had disappeared.

I spent some minutes trying to shut the thick, wooder door to the cell, but the rust-packed hinges held firm. I was entirely awake and decided to go down and ask the turnkey about moving to another cell. I went along the catwalk, thinking about the rat. He certainly was a big bastard. Probably full of a lot of history too.

The sheriff's office was dimly lighted and empty. I shook the barred door, hoping to bring the turnkey, but

there was no response. I turned away and started back to the stairway.

A grimy old citizen in tattered clothing rose from the bench next to the table in the middle of the floor and shouted something.

"What's on your mind?" I asked him, and went over to the bench.

"I wanna tell you something."

"I already know something, pop."

"Now, wait a minute," he said. "You don't know what I know."

"It's possible."

"Ah, you admit it," he said. "I've studied it out. I know." He placed a finger against the side of his nose. "It's all a matter of leverage, son. With the right leverage you can move a mountain. Any mountain."

"I thought it was faith."

"Aw," he said, and shook his head. "Used to be a tatalist myself. But I learned different. Take a Chineese."

"Another time, pop."

"You got any tobacco?"

"No. Sorry."

"Well, don't forget what I told you. It's all leverage. Gotta shift the center of gravity. Got the idea?"

He fell back on the bench, covered his face with his hands and began to mumble.

This was some detour. A champion detour.

I climbed to the upper tier and went into the washroom. I found a lean, bony-faced citizen sitting on a campstool, reading a book where the light was best. He looked up and grinned, and the skin puckered slightly over his cheekbones. He wore a shirt and trousers of matching blue, and his feet were stuck into leather slippers.

"How're you?" he said. His voice had a soft, raspy quality, and he spoke out of the side of his mouth. "You're a new arrival."

"Uh-huh."

"I was asleep," he said. "Let me be the last to welcome you to the Onager County Park of Culture and Unrest." He closed the book, leaving a finger sandwiched

between the pages, and held it so I could see it was Shakespeare's complete works.

I said, "You a prisoner?"

"Indeed I am. A model prisoner. What's your crime?"

"Trespassing on railroad property."

"Very damned serious."

"What about you?"

"Oh, I'm just making a retreat," he said. "And there's a small technical matter of some alimony."

"You live in Onager?"

"I'm practically a native son. I've lived here almost three years."

"What's the attraction?"

"Onager? It's the Athens of the eastern seaboard. The public library is open five days a week. And it has another big thing in its favor: This area has the only really temperate climate in the entire country. That means a lot to someone born and raised in Los Angeles." His nose twitched and he stood up. "Shall we move to the living room?"

We went out and stopped beside the tall windows. Outside, a row of evenly spaced trees cut the highway into neat sections, and the lights from passing traffic blinked on and off, going by.

"Nice view," he said. "On a clear day, you can see the two-dollar window at the track."

"That's at Balmoral?"

"Yeah. That's one of my lesser vices, betting on horses. That, and talking confidentially to strangers."

I gave him my hand and told him my name.

"Fred Grimm," he said. "Author of Grimm's Law. Which same is: Break up the family and save the home."

There was something familiar about him, standing there with the book in his hand.

I said, "You know Chicago?—the near North Side?"

He shook his head, and this too reminded me of one of my father's friends, a man he always referred to as "F. X. Cleary." They used to meet in the evenings at a place near where we lived. It was the blank side of an office building and they called it "the wailing wall."

I said, "My father has Shakespeare's plays in Yiddish. He used the book on his job."

"Oh?"

"His job was to read to the cigar makers in a factory while they worked."

"Yeah? I'd like to hear what he thinks of *King Lear*. I'm on it now."

In the distance a smoky haze floated up as if from a faraway fire. I thought about going to bed. "What do you do about the rats in here?"

"Our little four-footed friends been bothering you?"

"The one I saw wasn't little. I hit him with a shoe."

"Good work, John. That'll teach it a human being can be dangerous when cornered."

"If he's got a shoe."

"Indeed."

"I ought to try to get some sleep," I said. "There's a chance I'll need to be in good shape later today."

I told him about my talks with the railroad cop, Crumbaugh, and with the sheriff.

"You're a boxer," he said. "What're you doing rattling around the countryside?"

I moved my head automatically to let the question pass over my shoulder. It was a big question, crowding me, and it seemed to leave little room for an answer. Still, there were some names of cities and people, and Grimm was welcome to these, to make an answer for himself.

"I guess I've been on my way back to Chicago," I said. "From Miami. By the scenic route."

I had gone to Miami with Mickey Lester, a boxing manager I knew from the Chicago gymnasium where I trained. Soon after we arrived in Florida, he made a match for me with a Cuban lightweight named Enrique de los Reyes. The bout was for ten rounds and promised to pay well.

At the end of the bout I was glad it was over. My ribs ached from the pounding on the outside by Enrique and on the inside from the beating of my heart. While I dressed, Lester went out for a while, and when he came back his face looked like he had just made a large donation to a blood bank.

"It's OK, kid," he said.

Of course, it wasn't OK, not by \$1,500 worth. Which was the amount of money I would have had left after

paying Mickey Lester. The way it was, none of the boxers got paid, because the man who promoted the show had taken all the receipts and flown to Cleveland, where he dropped every dollar in a crap game.

Two days later Mickey Lester came to see me and asked if I could wire Chicago for money to take me home.

"I'm light, kid," Lester said. "Got just enough to get me out to the Coast."

That night I packed a toothbrush and razor into the bag I used for carrying my boxing gear and walked out of the hotel where I was staying, pretending I was just going down to the gym for a workout, and kept walking.

So—there was an answer of a kind to Grimm's question, but he was sharp enough, I saw in his face, to know that I had left out almost everything.

"Guess I'd better hit the kip," I said. "Just in case the sheriff decides to let me go."

"I'd like to see you box, John. I might just go down to Balmoral myself."

"How? Can you get out of here?"

"I can get out easy enough. I'll get an advance from my boss and pay my back alimony."

"How long does this alimony deal go on?"

"Forever. Or until she remarries. Which is the same thing," Grimm said. "She's a paid-up member of the Secularity of Our Lady of Perpetual Emotion, a veritable vixen." He grinned with half his mouth. "Oh, it was an idyll. An actual idyll. I rescued her from a runaway horse. Just like in the movies. Or a bad dream."

He talked like a man who was breaking a long vow of silence, hurriedly, letting the words tumble out and land where they fell. "The alimony wouldn't be a strain, ordinarily," Grimm said. "But I've got other interests. Conflicting interests. I like to buy books and records. Bach, for instance, has been keeping me broke. Bach and his galloping monasteries. And I like to make a regular contribution to the pari-mutuel machines. So every once in a while I get the shorts."

"Well, maybe I'll see you at the opera house in Balmoral, huh?"

"Yeah. I'll get the dough. You look for me, John. I'll wear a White Russian in my lapel."

"If the sheriff lets me go. He's a nervous type."

"That he is. Always running around hunched over like a dog trying to ride a football."

I turned away and went back to my cell, kicked off my shoes and lay down. I was very tired, and the last thing I remembered was a feeling about my own center of gravity. It seemed to be shifting about a great deal, as if a number of levers were at work under it. It got very complicated, and I was asleep before I could decide which lever was mine.

Bubber, the turnkey, woke me up. He stood over me, shaking his head, and the growth on his face seemed about to fall off. He spoke in a wheedling singsong: "I know you ain't got no worries on your mind, sleepin' like you do."

"What time is it?"

"Past two o'clock. Sheriff wants for you to come down. You got company."

"Anyone I know?"

"Sergeant Crumbaugh," the turnkey said.

I crossed the tier to the washroom, washed some of the sleep from my face and went down to the office. Crumbaugh pumped my hand like an old friend, but the sheriff was silent and looked worried.

"I told you," Crumbaugh said. "It's all fixed. You coming down to Balmoral this evening. Sheriff Burden says he'll carry you down there hisself."

"All I hope is I ain't makin' no mistake," the sheriff said. "You got to put up a good show, boy."

"Yah," Crumbaugh said. "You do that and I'll see you get a little somethin' for it."

"I've been meaning to ask," I said. "How much?"

"Now, boy," Crumbaugh said. "Don't you fret. I ain't one to go back on my honest word. The sheriff'll tell you."

The sheriff swung around in his chair. "Now, you sure you wanna go, boy?"

Crumbaugh answered for me, "Leroy, you talkin' to a boy's a professional fighter."

"This Valiant," I said. "How big is he?"

"You taller'n him," Crumbaugh said. "And you must have got a longer reach. It's a fair match, to my mind."

"I weigh one-thirty-five."

"Like I say," Crumbaugh said. "Valiant weighs about one-forty."

"You think he'll be too heavy for you?" the sheriff asked.

"It depends."

"Ain't hardly no difference at all between you boys," Crumbaugh said. "You got the reach on him."

"I'll need some clothes," I said. "Trunks and shoes."

"Haw! Reckon we can fix you up awright," Crumbaugh said. "One of the boys'll be glad to borrow you his clothes."

"I wear size eight shoes."

"Fighter from Decatur," Crumbaugh said. "I'll remember that, awright."

The sheriff said, "You gonna have a doctor down there this evenin', ain't you?"

"Yah. Ol' Doc Newhouse."

"Well now," the sheriff said. "Doc's awright. Don't you misunderstand me. But he's been actin' mighty moon-happy of late. Looks to me like he's trying to be the sole and only support of half the moonshiners in the county."

"Yet and still," Crumbaugh said. "Folks got a heap o' confidence in the old buzzard. He's the best damn corner the county ever did have."

"You right there, Andy."

"Sheriff Burden," I said, "what're the chances of my getting something to eat? I'll pay for it."

"Well now," the sheriff said, "ain't no need for you to go spendin' your money. Reckon we got somethin' in the kitchen. . . . Eh, Bubber?"

"They some pork chops," the turnkey said.

"You can give him an apple, too," the sheriff said. "They in the bowl."

Bubber went out, and Crumbaugh stood up. "Leroy I'm much obliged to you," he said, and shook hands with the sheriff. "You all come to the stage door about half past eight, hah? I'll be waitin' on you."

"Sure. Reckon it'll do to have my brother Dero be this boy's second," the sheriff said.

Crumbaugh frowned. "You tell Dero he don't need to tote his pistol into the ring, now."

The sheriff laughed. "County regulations says a deputy got to be armed long's he's with a prisoner on the outside. But I'll tell Dero to leave it off."

They walked together to the front door, and Crumbaugh went out. Then the turnkey came back from the kitchen, bringing a package wrapped in a page from the Onager newspaper. I took it from him and he motioned me inside the cell block.

"See you later," I said.

I stopped to look in Grimm's cell before going on to my own. He was sleeping soundly, with the blanket drawn up over his mouth, and his long nose stuck out like a fleshy pin. His book lay on the floor beside the cot. I left, thinking I would see him later.

I went into my cell and opened the package. There were three cold pork chops, an apple and four slices of grayish bread that looked half baked. I put aside the bread and ate the chops and the apple, meanwhile reading the newspaper page. The food wasn't much for taste, but it relieved my hunger. I took off my shoes and stretched out. I was reading a letter from a farmer, telling how he had operated a successful rabbit farm for twenty-eight years, when I fell asleep.

Hours later I woke up and stared at the sheet of newspaper stuck to the wall in front of me. Grimm had come in while I was asleep and had written a note on it and pasted it on the wall with a piece of bread.

"Happy boss sent dough to ex-mate," the note said. "I'm getting out. See you tonight. Best luck. Fred Grimm."

I put on my shoes and went out and glanced toward the windows. I saw it was evening. I went down to where Cicero was standing in a cloud of thin steam that floated up from the wet socks on the radiator. The hard-faced Texan was leaning against the wall nearby, and he followed my movements with his eyes.

Cicero seemed diffident, as though he were feeling

strained. I thought it might be the Texan. "Has the cowboy been behaving himself?" I asked.

"Aw, he ain't nothing but face." Cicero said. Then he raised his head and looked over my shoulder. "Mister Step-and-a-half callin' you."

I turned around, and the turnkey beckoned me impatiently.

"Well," I said, "I got to be going."

"You leavin'?" Cicero asked.

"I'll be back. Going out for a little while."

"You jivin' me, man."

"No. The sheriff is taking me down to the Balmoral opera house."

"What you gonna do—sing?"

"No. They've got a fight show. I'm supposed to represent the Onager County A.C."

"Well, man," Cicero said. "Take it slow."

The turnkey took me to meet the sheriff, who was waiting in his car at the rear of the building. I got in beside him, but he didn't say anything when I greeted him. He started the car, and I pretended to watch the passing countryside, which was flat and uninteresting. The sheriff seemed to be brooding and kept his eyes fixed on the road.

We approached a bridge, and to the right I saw the railroad bridge where I had been arrested the day before. Then we entered Balmoral, and the sheriff made a sharp turn to his left, passed a number of parked cars and stopped beside a fireplug. I began to get out, but the sheriff held me.

"You sure you in good shape, now?" he asked.

"The doctor'll tell you I'm OK."

The sheriff seemed to plead with me. "I don't aim to be worryin' you, boy. But they's gonna be a mess if anything does happen."

We got out of the car and went to the stage door. We went in and found Crumbaugh and Dero waiting for us. Crumbaugh grinned happily and began to tell the sheriff about the size of the crowd and about some of the people in it.

The opera house still managed to retain its former character, despite the boxing ring and the way the seats

were set out. At one end was a curtained stage, standing between elaborately carved but flaking pillars of imitation marble.

In the ring, a bout was under way, and I slowed to watch the fighters, but Crumbaugh went on ahead and halted in front of a door and pushed it open. He beckoned me to come on, and I followed him into the dressing room.

"You go on in the final," he said. He tilted his head in the direction of my adversary of the evening. "That's Valiant."

Valiant was alone, and naked except for a khaki towel around his waist. He sat on a tilted chair, holding a comic book, and ignored me. His pockmarked face looked as though someone in heavy, hob-nailed boots had walked on it, and gashes ran through it like trenches. His ears were lumps of child's clay, and his body looked like hard-packed, gray clay too. His arms were tattooed up to the shoulders and the colors were beginning to fade. One tattoo showed a serpent coiled around a wide-handled knife.

"Be back directly," Crumbaugh said, and went away. The sheriff and Dero remained outside.

I closed the door behind me, and Valiant put down the comic book and straightened his chair. He rose and shuffled toward me, moving his feet like a crab and carrying his head like a man going around a corner with an egg in a spoon.

"Ya t'ink yer pretty good, huh?" he asked. His puffed lips, scarred inside, muffled the words.

"I am pretty good," I said.

"I been fightin' twelve years. I fought some of the best."

"You ought to know better. By now."

"Huh?"

"You never won a fight in a dressing room, did you?"

"They said you was from Chicago."

"So?"

"I boxed there many's the times. At the Stadium."

"An outdoor man."

"I beat Eddie Snyder."

"Never heard of him."

"I busted his ribs," Valiant said. "They liked me in Chicago. I done awright there."

"You had a good paper route."

"I never went hungry in Chi, Mac. Not me. I lived like a king."

The king of Chicago. Some monarch.

"They like my action in this burg," Valiant said. "Last week they give me some kid from town. I belted him out in the third round."

"You look like someone who'd hit a kid," I said.

His head jerked around. Then his belligerence gave way and he said, "I know you from somewheres, don't I?"

"Maybe." I put out my hand and said, "My name's Corporal Valiant."

"Sure. Sure. I t'ought I seen you before." But then he got it and pulled his hand out of mine and swung vaguely. "G'wan, ya muzzler," he said. "I'm Corporal Valiant."

He shuffled away, spluttering angry and indistinct sounds. He picked up the comic book, threw it down and kicked at it. I watched him, expecting anything, but he didn't look at me.

The door was thrown back violently and Crumbaugh came in with the doctor, a short, bald man whose glasses fell forward on his nose. The doctor carried the usual small, black bag. He also brought in a strong smell of liquor.

"Har ya, boys," the doctor said. He went over to punch Valiant lightly on the arm. Valiant brought up his hands, and the doctor said, "You look pretty good to me, son."

Crumbaugh said, "This boy's Johnny Benjamin, Doc. He's from Chicago."

The doctor came toward me and extended a soft hand. "Glad to know you, Johnny."

"Hello."

"Fine. Fine. Har you feelin'?"

"OK."

"Never had no aches or pains or trouble with your heart?" the doctor asked.

"No."

"Fine. Reckon you boys'll give us a good show th

evenin'. May the best one win." He turned to Crumbaugh. "Andy, I will certify that these boys are fit."

"Say, Doctor," I said. "Have you got any extra bandages and absorbent cotton?"

The doctor searched his bag and found several rolls of bandages, and I picked out two which were the right width for my hands. While he looked for the cotton, Dero came in with a pair of damp trunks, a pair of boxing shoes and a jockstrap.

Dero said, "Boy says for you to take care and not lose this stuff."

The doctor closed his bag and said, "Good luck, boys."

"Well now, Doc," Crumbaugh said. "How's about takin' a little snort?" He held the door for the doctor and followed him out.

Dero glanced at me and asked, "You gonna need anything more?"

"I'm all right."

He looked relieved and said, "I'll be out here if you think of anything." He pulled the door back, and Fred Grimm came in. The deputy hesitated, then shrugged and went out.

"Hello, John," Grimm said. "Is it OK for me to visit?"

He had changed his clothes and was freshly shaved. In his hand was the book he had been reading in the jail, the complete Shakespeare.

I said, "I see you made it."

Valiant was dressing, and he acted as though we were not in the same room. He pulled on a pair of purple trunks and slipped his arms through the sleeves of a worn, brown bathrobe. Then he covered his hands with a pair of smelly green-wool bandages, the kind boxers use in training. He seemed to know how to do the bandaging.

Grimm said, "I brought this book along, thinking maybe you'd like to have it."

"You sure?"

"I want you to have it, John."

Valiant stood up and shot his fists at the air, punching at an imaginary target and accompanying the motions with snorting breaths from his nose. Suddenly he stopped

shadow boxing and went to the door and left the room without looking at us once.

"Who's he?" Grimm asked.

"My esteemed opponent, Corporal Valiant."

"God," he said. "He must think I'm pretty creepy, bring you a book."

"Well," I said, "it's not a comic book."

"That it ain't," he said.

I began to get ready, and Grimm drew up a chair and sat down. He put the book on a table.

Grimm watched me dress for the fight, observing my actions as though they were a strange ritual. I wound a bandage around my hand, doubled it back and forth over the knuckles and between my fingers, used my teeth to tear the end of the gauze, knotted the two ends to prevent them from parting down the middle, and held out my hand.

"You want me to tie it?" he said. I turned my wrist and held it out to him and he tied the knot.

"That's a square knot," Grimm said. "The only knot I remember from my brief but honorable career in the Navy. I lasted three months till the old man got me out because I was under age."

"Were you sorry?"

"Not at first. I was fourteen. I was a big kid for my age, but the old man could hit harder."

He helped me with the other bandage, and I said, "Too bad the sheriff wants his brother in my corner. You could be my second."

"I wouldn't know what to do."

"Neither will Dero. His job is to keep an eye on me in case I try to escape," I said. "I'll ask Crumbaugh to tell the sheriff I want you in my corner."

"Don't. I tell you I don't know a thing about this business. I've only seen one fight in my life. And I went to that because one of the guys was a guy I knew. It was his last fight."

"Huh?"

"All those semiskilled intellectuals, the sportswriters, were sure he took a dive. But he never regained consciousness."

Under the circumstances, his reminiscences were out of

order. But I didn't know how to stop him without shouting at him.

"This guy was really built," he said. "They used him as a model for some damned trophy. That is, they used his body but another model's head. His head was no bigger than a baby's."

"Look," I said. "Let's talk about something else. The batting averages in the Texas League."

Grimm was startled by my tone and stood up. "I didn't mean to get off like that."

He looked uncomfortable, and I said, "You're OK. But on the way down here, I got a big load of worry from the sheriff. And then . . ." I wanted to tell him about Valiant. But I didn't. Valiant was something I'd have to do alone and for myself.

"You want me to leave?"

"OK. Thanks for the book."

"Yeah."

He went out and I was alone. The room was windowless and the door was closed, but I felt chilled. I rubbed some warmth into my arms and punched at the air.

Behind me the door was thrown back and banged against the wall, and the deputy sheriff said, "You ready, boy? It's time now."

"Where're the gloves?"

"They got 'em in the ring, I reckon," Dero said.

I went to the door, taking the book with me. Dero saw it. His mouth opened.

"I don't want to leave this here," I said. "I'll take it with me. And you keep an eye on it in the corner."

"What you sayin', boy?"

"Here, you carry the book. I don't want anybody to clout it." I handed him the book and he took it, looking a little bewildered.

"Let's go," I said. I started down the aisle leading to the ring, and Dero followed me.

Valiant was already in the ring, seated on a low, wooden stool and talking with a soldier who stood beside him. I crawled through the ropes near the vacant corner, and the soldier turned to look at me and turned away again. Dero stayed outside the ring, standing on the

apron. My book lay face down on the canvas near his feet.

There was a pair of gloves on the stool. They were damp with sweat and bulged in the wrong places. While Dero tied the laces, I glanced over the crowd, looking for Grimm. But he wasn't in any of the seats close to the ring, and the rest of the auditorium was shrouded in a dense tobacco fog.

Behind me, in the row of seats at ringside, an over-stuffed woman who wore a wide, red straw hat pointed to me and said in a loud voice, "I'm bettin' on that boy. He's real cute." The very fat, red-faced man who sat next to her slapped the woman sharply on the thigh, making her rise from her chair. They laughed together, drunkenly.

Waiting like this always produced the sensation of a nervous bladder. It was the adrenal gland pressing on my kidney. I had read about it. Excitement stimulates the adrenal gland, which sends out something to speed up the heart action. It was a hell of a spot to have such a gland, right over the kidney. A familiar sour taste filled my mouth. "Hyperchacidity," my father called it when he told me how a big, brutal guy had threatened to beat him, a small man armed with a thin book. Fear tightened my nerves and tremors ran under my skin. It was always like this and I was impatient for the first shock of contact.

Crumbaugh climbed into the ring. Someone struck the bell, and the crowd became attentive. Crumbaugh announced: "Folks, this is the fight you all been waitin' on." He went on to introduce Corporal Bobby Valiant from the U.S. Army Arsenal at Ridgeview, and the crowd responded with cheers and whistling. Crumbaugh waited for the noise to subside and then introduced me: "Johnny Benjamin out of Chicago, Illinois." Some of the crowd cheered, perhaps as much for Chicago, Illinois, as for me.

"Neighbors," Crumbaugh said, "I reckon you all would appreciate knowin' that Benjamin is a special protégé of our good sheriff, Leroy Burden. Stand up, Leroy, and take a bow."

When the applause and laughter ended, another man, bald and ministerial-looking, entered the ring. He wore

light-tan trousers and a T-shirt decorated with a picture of an artillery shell surrounded by the words: U.S. ARMY RIDGEWAY ARSENAL.

Crumbaugh said, "The referee for this bout will be none other than our old friend, Chaplain Downer."

The referee called Valiant and me to the center of the ring and recited the rules in an uncertain voice. He sounded like he was delivering a benediction, and it would not have surprised me if his speech had ended, "Go, and sin no more."

"By the way," I said. "I didn't hear anyone mention how many rounds we're supposed to box."

"Ten rounds, son," the referee said.

I went back to my corner, and the bell sounded. I shuffled out to meet Valiant and he came toward me, crouched low and moving crablike, as though he were straddling puddles in a wet street. His hands hung below his knees.

We circled each other, and I jabbed his face lightly and Valiant swung at the same time, aiming for my groin. I dropped my right glove and blocked his swing and Valiant stepped back. His face was unprotected and I pumped my left hand into it, landing solidly. Again, I stuck my left in his face and crossed with a right that pounded his nose. He began to bleed from his nose and he snorted, blowing a bloody spray that speckled me with red dots. I aimed a jab for his head and he ducked, but I hit him with an uppercut. He crouched lower and swung wildly, and I stopped the blow with my forearm. He started another swing, from below his knees, and lunged at me. The punch landed on the side of my head, but there was no force in it. My fear went away. I snapped a jab into his face and hit him hard on the jaw with my right. His knees buckled, but he didn't fall. I jabbed him again, smearing blood over his face, and he stood flat-footed, weaving his head from side to side like a snake. Then he rushed, caught me in his arms and wrestled me to the ropes. I tried to twist free and he brought up his head and struck my chin a sharp blow. I felt the quick, smarting pain of the wound as he pressed forward and continued to maul me with his head and shoulders. Finally, I let myself go limp and sagged against the ropes,

and his weight carried him with me. I got my knee between his legs and jerked it upward, and he let go and I hit him on the chin as the bell rang. He ignored the bell and threw a punch that went over my head. He spun around, off balance, and was saved from falling by the referee.

Dero, my second, waited for me in the corner, blocking the stool. He was grinning happily and slapped my back as I walked around him.

"Sit down, Benny," he said. "Sit down, boy. You doin' good."

"Who's Benny?"

"You, boy," Dero said. "Heah, have some water."

I brushed the bottle aside and looked down at the patches of wet blood on my chest, belly and arms. Dero took off his baseball cap and flapped it up and down in front of me.

"Don't do that," I said. "You got a towel?"

"Reckon you could use one," he said. But he didn't move.

"Some second!"

He straightened up and laughed softly. "I like to bust a gut seein' you hit that boy's nose every time."

"Why don't you go sit down somewhere?"

"Me? I got to stay right here with you, boy."

I saw the book and reached down with both gloves to pick it up. I gave it to him, and he took it without understanding.

"Read to me," I said.

He stared at me and then lowered his glance to look at the page. He tilted his head and his lips moved silently. He seemed baffled.

"Tell me you readin' this?"

"Yeah. It's in English."

Dero shut the book with a loud noise and tossed it to me. "Boy, I think you gettin' simple, more'n likely."

I laid the book on the canvas next to the ring post and turned around as the bell rang.

Valiant rushed from his corner and stopped abruptly in the center of the ring. He waited, as if daring me to cross an imaginary line. I walked directly up to him, feinted with my left and pounded my right hand into his face.

His mouth guard flew out of his mouth and landed near the edge of the ring. Blood ran from his nose. He doubled over and charged at me, flailing with both hands. I was too slow and he landed a low punch that sent a spurt of pain through me. I stepped back, keeping my left hand poised, and waited till the pain stopped. Meanwhile, Valiant pawed at the air between us.

The crowd urged Valiant to hit me again, and he tried to do it. But now I felt stronger and avoided his rushes. I jabbed his face repeatedly and solidly, and landed with a right. Valiant stumbled, shook his head and cursed me.

After that, he made no effort to protect himself but came at me again and again, swinging wildly at my lower body and failing to connect. He was easier to hit now and stumbled oftener, but he replied to my hardest punches by shaking his head and repeating his curses.

Some of them, when they're like that, are hard to stop with anything less than a baseball bat. They're all disarranged inside and you hit them on the chin, getting all your weight into it, and they only snort and keep moving in.

Valiant swung a long, looping right and I stepped back. He slipped on the bloody canvas and sat down. He looked tired and confused sitting there. I went over to a neutral corner and the referee kneeled and began to count slowly, speaking the numbers into Valiant's ear.

There was no way of telling how much time remained till the end of the round, but it seemed the referee would use all of it to help Valiant. Then the bell rang and Valiant's second came out and escorted his fighter to the corner, where he dropped to the stool.

When I reached my corner, Dero was trying to get my stool into the ring. He had been drinking and managed the stool with difficulty. Eventually he got it through the ropes and set it down.

"Now, they-ah," he said.

"Thanks."

"You awright, boy? You want anything?"

I didn't answer but let my hands droop and breathed deeply.

"Reckon you got a cut on your chin, Benny-boy," Dero said. "Heah, lemme look at it."

"Leave it alone. It's nothing."

"Nothin'?"

I was restless and impatient for the bout to resume. I stood up, and my action brought a drunken shout from the overstuffed woman in the red straw hat.

Dero said, "Reckon you think I'm useless."

"You're giving yourself the best of it, boy."

"Yah," he said. "I figure you oughta take him in the next round."

"What round is it?"

He cocked his head and looked suspicious. "The third," he said.

"Right. You're smart."

Dero took a deep breath and faced me squarely. "You know what, Benny-boy? You can just go——" His speech was heard by the people at ringside, and he left the ring amid the sound of laughter and cheers. The bell rang, silencing the laughter.

Valiant shuffled from his corner, looking white-faced and wary. When I came near him, he gathered himself and launched a desperate swing. I saw him start it and stepped inside and hit him hard on the jaw. He sank to the floor and sprawled there, conscious and muttering curses.

The referee waved me to the side of the ring and dropped to one knee and began to count. This time I could hear him.

". . . nine," the referee said.

Suddenly Valiant sprang to his feet and dashed toward his corner. He grabbed his towel and bathrobe and began to leave the ring. The referee ran after him and tried to hold him, but Valiant wrenched loose.

"To hell with that fink," Valiant shouted. He succeeded in freeing himself from the clutches of his second and jumped down to the floor. The crowd howled in protest and several men rose in his path, as if to prevent him from leaving.

Valiant lowered his head and charged, and the aisle opened for him. He seemed to be shouting in answer to the crowd, but his words were drowned out by the loud booing. He ran all the way to the dressing room and

slammed the door behind him. But the booing persisted, even while the audience was leaving.

The referee came toward me. "You the winner, I reckon," he said, and raised my hand.

He paused, about to say something more, and changed his mind. I walked to my corner. My second had disappeared, but Grimm was waiting for me at the ringside. I saw that he had picked up the book and was holding it under his arm. He untied the laces and pulled the gloves off my hands. They were trembling a little and he noticed it.

"Lousy fight," I said.

"The manly art of self-defense," Grimm said, and smiled with half his mouth.

"You didn't like it, huh?"

"Well," Grimm said, "I'm glad you won."

Sheriff Burden came up, looking very pleased, and pounded my back. He said, "You awright, boy. Sure enough." He was half drunk, at least, and felt fine. His drawl was longer than usual. "Yah, yah, boy. You really put it on Valiant, awright." He turned to Grimm. "I got me a fine boy. Ain' 'at so?"

Grimm nodded seriously, and the sheriff said, "You damn right."

"How'd you like to go down to Roxburgh, boy?" the sheriff asked.

"Roxburgh?"

"Yah. They got a couple-three boys down there I'd like to match you up with."

"Your new manager," Grimm said.

"Yeah."

"Go on and get you clothes, boy," the sheriff said. "I got to see a feller a minute." He slapped my back and went away, laughing excitedly.

Grimm walked with me to the door of the dressing room. I looked in and saw that it was empty. I felt relieved.

"You don't have to go," I said to Grimm.

"I guess I can get a later bus."

"Sure."

We went in and I removed the bandages and used them to wipe the blood from my arms and chest. Grimm sat

watching me, his face serious. I fingered the cut on my chin and it didn't feel like much.

Sometimes, like now, a dressing room served as a decompression chamber. As the pressure decreased, the fight appeared like a train of separate incidents almost detached from one another. I laughed at the memory of Valiant's face as he left the ring, clawing frantically at the trailing bathrobe.

I was smiling when Crumbaugh and the sheriff came in. The sheriff brought a bottle of liquor and unscrewed the cap, fumbled it drunkenly and dropped it. He kicked the fallen cap aside and held up the bottle.

"Hell's fire," the sheriff said. "Heah's to the evidence."

He pressed the bottle to his lips and drank. Then he passed the bottle to me and said, "Won't hurt you none."

I lifted the bottle and let some of the liquor into my mouth and swallowed. It traveled like a flame along a fuse and exploded in my stomach. I offered the bottle to Grimm. He waved it aside.

"Thanks," Grimm said. "I'll pass." He patted my arm. "Guess I'd better blow."

"Thanks again for the book," I said to his back.

"Andy," the sheriff said, "I'm fixin' to take this boy down to Roxburgh. He'd go good down there, huh?"

Crumbaugh took a long drink, gulped, and gave the bottle to the sheriff. "You going to Roxburgh," Crumbaugh said. "They got a colored boy down there I'd like to see get a beatin'."

"Nawsuh," the sheriff said. "I don't aim for my boy to be fightin' with a nigger. Nawsuh."

"Well," Crumbaugh said, "this boy I got in mind stands in need of a real good beatin'. Ain't no one done it yet."

"I don't know about that," the sheriff said. "We'll see when the time comes. Eh, boy?"

Crumbaugh reached into his pocket and drew out some money and made a fan of five-dollar bills. "This is for you, boy."

"All of it?"

"Yah. You put up a good show this evening." He took the bottle from the sheriff and drank. When he lowered the bottle, Crumbaugh said, "You know one thing. This

moon sure makes a man hongry. I reckon this boy could eat a little something too. What d'you say we drive over to Noreen's, eh, Leroy?"

"She runnin' again?"

"Don't you know that?"

"Well now," the sheriff said, "I got to think of this boy."

"We'll see he don't get to messin' around," Crumbaugh said. "You takin' him to Roxburgh, he's got to keep in training."

There was a burned-out taste in my mouth and my tongue felt like a piece of charred rope. When I wet my lips, the spittle clung to them like a dry ash. It was always like this after a fight.

The sheriff saw the book in my hand and his face wrinkled in puzzlement. "What you totin', boy?" he asked. His glance wandered drunkenly as he examined the cover. "Where you get it?"

"Grimm gave it to me."

"'At's a funny idear, sure enough," Crumbaugh said. "Bringin' a boy a book. A boy 'at's a prizefighter, I mean."

"I can read too."

"Aw now," Crumbaugh said. "I don't mean to say you ignorant, boy."

"How can you tell?" I said, and moved toward the door. But the sheriff stood in my way and raised the bottle to the light. "Reckon we oughta kill this before we go, Andy," he said.

"Be better'n leavin' it lame like it is."

They emptied the bottle without offering me a drink. Then we went out to the car, where the sheriff halted abruptly and searched his pockets for the key to the door, and the jerky motions lifted the bottom of his coat. I saw he was wearing a gun. When he faced around, his look wavered and settled on me. "You drive, boy?"

"Yes."

"Reckon you'll do the driving."

Crumbaugh crowded onto the front seat beside the sheriff. "It's just th' other side of the horse track," he said. "Straight out this road."

"And best you drive careful," the sheriff said. "Don't want no trouble with the laws." He laughed good-naturedly.

I shifted gears, gained speed and drove into the quiet night, listening to the soft sound of the tires on the smooth pavement and the persistent, tuneless whistle of the wind in the power lines overhead. The two men sounded as though they were in another room.

Crumbaugh said, "You ain't been by Noreen's in some while, hah? Been real busy, I reckon."

"Yah. Been busy rightly enough."

"Leroy, what you think about puttin' on a real big fight show durin' fair week? We could take and fill 'at ball park up at Onager and make us a fine piece of money."

"Well now," the sheriff said. "Reckon you'd have to get the county's approval on something such as that."

"Aw, you ought not to have no trouble on that account. Big as you are in the county."

"Big as I am," the sheriff said, "I can't get the money so's I can deputize another three-four men."

"Yet and still, you the high sheriff, Leroy. I ain't aimin' to blow smoke up your nose. Just statin' a fact is all."

"I appreciate you mean rightly," the sheriff said. "Tell you what, Andy. You come up and see me tomorrow, or call me on the phone, one."

"Be mighty glad."

We were coming to the Balmoral racetrack. In the distance, a horse neighed, probably in answer to the sound of the motor. The road curved in the shadow of the high, darkened grandstand and took us toward a huge, flashing electric sign which advertised NOREEN'S INN. Neon horses flickered around the outer edge of the sign.

The inn stood in a glen about a hundred yards back from the road, at the end of a pebbled driveway, and it looked like one of those ancient veterans of the Civil War, dressed and barbered for his last parade on earth. The hedge on each side of the entrance resembled a pair of dusty and ragged muttonchop whiskers, and the tall, fluted columns across the front of the house were like the meaningless military braid on an old soldier's coat.

But whatever anyone might think of its appearance, Noreen's Inn certainly was a popular place. The parking lot in the rear was full to capacity.

The sheriff pointed to a cluster of small cabins beyond the parking lot. "Reckon he can pull up 'side of them cabins, eh, Andy?"

I stopped beside the nearest cabin and began to get out of the car, and the sheriff said, "Wait up, boy. Best you come on out this side. Don't want you takin' a notion to go off by yourself, now."

"What about the book? Will it be safe here?"

"Hah. Never hear of anyone stealin' a book long's I been sheriff."

"I can believe that."

"Y'know somethin'?" Crumbaugh said. "My gran'-pappy growed tobacco right here on the old McCobb place."

"Dif'nt times, dif'nt crops," the sheriff said.

"But now, you got to give ol' Noreen her fair credit. They'd be a whole lot more hongry folks in this county anytime she's forced to close down for good and all."

"Ain't likely," the sheriff said. "She got too many powerful friends in the state."

We came to the front door and went in, and it was like stepping unexpectedly into the frenzied atmosphere of a revival meeting. A confusion of excited voices, explosive shrieks and loud music that sounded like a hymn beat against my eardrums. Two large amplifiers brought the music from a jukebox somewhere in the room. It seemed that everyone, including the couples dancing in the center of the floor, was holding a drink of one kind or another.

Some of the crowd recognized the sheriff, but none of them showed any alarm, and a few men looked at him directly and laughed. The sheriff fidgeted and seemed anxious to escape the people who were staring at him.

Crumbaugh saw an empty booth near the bar on the far side of the room and led the way toward it. As we went along, we passed several booths occupied by men and women in close embrace. Crumbaugh enjoyed staring at the embracing couples, but they were oblivious of him. We came to the empty booth, and Crumbaugh beckoned to a girl standing nearby. She was dressed in tight slacks

and a white blouse decorated with pictures of prancing horses.

"Har ya, Lucille?" Crumbaugh said when the girl came to the table.

"Just fine, Andy. What are you all havin'?"

"You tell Noreen me and Sheriff Burden wanna see her, hah?"

"And bring us some hamburgs," the sheriff said.

The girl walked away, and Crumbaugh stared at her rear and wagged his head. "Man, 'at's a real feisty li'l ol' gal," he said.

The sheriff grunted and turned away to watch an old man stagger toward the bar, aiming for it with a fixed, drunken look. "Old Harvey," the sheriff said. "Drunk as a hundred dollars."

The old man reached the bar, but the other customers flattened themselves against it and refused to give him an opening. He sniffed, nodding his head as though it were too heavy. Then he spun around on bent knees and went away, and the people at the bar laughed.

"Hah," Crumbaugh said. "They really put it on old Harvey."

"Sure did," the sheriff said.

A squarely built woman who wore a costume like Lucille's approached the table, smiling broadly. Her very black hair looked as if it had been dyed quite recently.

"Noreen," Crumbaugh said.

"Har you all?" Noreen said. Her voice was deep, like a man's. "How you been keepin' yourself, Sheriff?"

Crumbaugh moved and Noreen sat opposite me. "Don't believe I know this boy," she said.

"Johnny Benjamin."

"You the boy whipped Bobby Valiant," Noreen said. "I am happy to know you."

"See the fight?"

"Naw. But I would've, had I knowed it was gonna happen. It sure did my heart good to hear about it."

"You don't like Valiant?"

"Boy, you ain't sayin' half. Not after what he done to Sissie the other night. Took her out back and like t killed her. He put a knot on her head big as your fist

Wait'll I tell her you here. She's gonna love you to death."

"Nawsuh," the sheriff said. "This boy's in training."

"Hell, Sheriff, I know about fighters," Noreen said. She put her hand on mine. "Don't I, honey?"

"Aw-aw," the sheriff said quickly. "I got to get him to bed real soon."

"You treatin' this boy like a common prisoner."

"It's all right," I said. "The sheriff is interested in my health."

"Yah," the sheriff said.

"Leroy and me fixin' to put on a big show up at the Onager, come fair week," Crumbaugh said.

"'At so?" Noreen asked. "Tell you what. You match him up with Corporal Valiant again and I'll close my place and bring everybody."

"Well now," Crumbaugh said, "that sound like a mighty good idea."

"I'll get me some seats right up by the ringside," Noreen said. "Every time you sock him me and Sissie'll whoop and holler."

"Yah," Crumbaugh said. "A rematch sound like a mighty fine idea, don't it, Leroy?"

"We'll have a drink on it," Noreen said. She stood up and shouted, "Flannagan! Come on out here and meet some folks. And bring a bottle, love. . . . You ain't met Flannagan, Sheriff. My new husband."

"I bet he's a good man," the sheriff said.

"You right there," Noreen said. "He got to be for this 'ol' gal." She turned to the bar again. "Flannagan! Call Sissie and tell her to come down. . . . Lucky thing I put in that phone system," she said. "It like to saved Sissie's life. . . . Now I'll tell you somethin' you can celebrate, Sheriff. Mavis'll be back in a couple-three days."

"Sure 'nough?" the sheriff said.

Noreen smiled and winked an eye. "I know you'll be mighty glad to see her."

"Well now . . ."

"Ain't no use for you to deny it, Sheriff."

The sheriff turned and tried to hide his face with his hand. But Noreen enjoyed baiting him. "Don't I know

it?" she said. "You lookin' a li'l peaked, if I do say so."

The sheriff grinned foolishly. "Mavis is a good li'l o' gal," he said.

"And so romantic," Noreen said. "She didn't hardly know that boy she run off with. I tried to make her wait awhile and see how things peter out. But not Mavis Nawsuh."

While Noreen talked, the sheriff became increasingly miserable. He compressed his lips and filled his cheeks with air and slouched in his seat. Then Lucille arrived with the hamburgers and provided a diversion, and the sheriff exhaled noisily in relief.

Noreen lifted the check from Lucille's tray and said "They my guests, honey."

Lucille nodded silently and turned to go, and Crumbaugh's eyes followed her.

"Ooo-eee, Lucille," Crumbaugh said.

"You takin' that name in vain, Andy," Noreen said. "Lucille gonna get married next weekend."

"Yet and still," Crumbaugh began as a smiling, sandy-haired man in a bartender's jacket came to the table carrying an unopened bottle of liquor and four glasses.

Noreen said, "Come and set, love. And shake hands with Sheriff Burden and Johnny Benjamin, the boy who whipped Corporal Valiant this evening."

Flannagan squeezed into the booth beside his wife. "That one's a terrible lad," he said with a soft Irish brogue. "When he gets too much of the liquor in him, he loses all his nobility."

It was a funny thing for anyone to say about Valiant.

Flannagan poured generous drinks into the four glasses, and Crumbaugh said, "We shy a glass."

"Noreen and I are drinking outa the one glass," Flannagan said, and his wife smiled warmly.

"To your very good health, gents. And more power to you, Johnny."

The sheriff drank and grunted appreciatively. "'At right good drinkin' liquor. Whey you gettin' it?"

"It's the leprechaun's own brew," Flannagan said. "Distilled and bottled by me own little people."

"Hah. You talking like I was a federal man," the sheriff said.

Flannagan ignored the sheriff's complaint and raised the bottle and shook it. Tiny crystals formed on the surface of the liquor. "We call this 'church whiskey,' " he said, "for you can see the beads on it." He removed the cap. "Have another."

Flannagan watched me drink. "You like it, eh?" he said.

"Uh-huh. One more drink and I'll be seeing my own little people, the leprecohens."

Flannagan filled our glasses and Crumbaugh began to tell him about the fight. It didn't sound like the one I'd been in, but Flannagan listened eagerly. His head bobbed, and twice he interrupted Crumbaugh to ask me, "Is that so, Johnny?"

When Crumbaugh spoke of making another match with Valiant, Flannagan stared at me with round eyes full of wonder. He filled my glass. "Bring on the leprecohens, me boy. It's their night to dance."

"Reckon this boy's had a-plenty," the sheriff said, and looked at his wristwatch. "Time we's making tracks for home."

"Naw," Noreen said. "Sissie'll be here in a minute. You got to wait."

"Sorry, Noreen," the sheriff said. "You coming with us, Andy?"

"Reckon I'll just stay on for a li'l bit," Crumbaugh said. "I'll be awright."

Just then a girl with pale, blonde hair came around the end of the bar and walked toward us. The ends of her blouse were tied in a knot under her full bosom. She wore little makeup, and when she smiled the cleft of her chin widened.

Noreen went to meet the girl and brought her to the table. "You know Andy and the sheriff," Noreen said. "And this boy's Johnny Benjamin."

"Har ya, Johnny."

The sheriff remained in his seat, and she passed her hand in front of him. Flannagan gave up his place to the girl. "I'll be getting back to work now," he said.

Noreen said, "By all rights, you got to give Johnny a

real big hug and a kiss, Sissie. He whipped that no-'count Valiant this evening up to the opera house."

"Sure enough?"

"That's what I said. This boy's your hero," Noreen said.

"Oh . . ." Sissie leaned across the table and put her arms around my neck. Her mouth found mine quickly.

I heard Noreen laugh and clap her hands. "'At's the way to do, gal. Now give him another 'cause he gonna whip Valiant again."

The sheriff moved out of the booth and stood beside the table. He looked stern. "You folks finished with your damn foolishness, we'd best be on our way."

There was nothing to do about it, and I slid along the seat and got up.

"Reckon you won't mind if we see you all to your car," Noreen said. "We'll go out the back."

Sissie put her hand in mine and we walked on, with the sheriff and Noreen following. It was the damnedest procession.

"Look like Sissie really likes that boy," Noreen said. "They sweet."

The sheriff answered by clearing his throat noisily. When we came to the car, Noreen said, "Now you take good care of him, Sheriff."

"Yah."

"You kiss Johnny good night, Sissie, and we'll go on back."

Sissie dropped my hand and turned and pressed the length of her body against mine while she held me tightly. When we separated, the sheriff said, "Get inna car, boy."

"Want me to drive?" I asked.

"Hell's fire! Not after all 'at smoochin' you doin', boy. You liable to drive us into a ditch."

The sheriff jerked open the door, muttering under his breath. His eyes were narrowed and downcast, and he started the motor with a roar that startled Noreen and Sissie. As the sheriff swung the car about, the two women waved. I waved my hand in return, and the car shot ahead rapidly, passed through the parking lot, careened around the side of the house and went on. A half minute more and we were back on the highway, going like hell.

The sheriff curved his body over the wheel in a space too small for him and held his foot hard against the accelerator. He paid no attention to the signs that warned of crossroads or railroad tracks. Luckily there was no other traffic on the highway.

My body swayed from side to side as though my head were a balloon. I gave myself up to remembering Sissie's eyes, nose, mouth and the pressure of her body.

The car hit a bump and leaped forward jerkily. "Damn woman," the sheriff said.

"How about slowing down a little?"

"You ain't scared, boy? You s'posed to be a hero."

"Oh, Noreen was only kidding, Sheriff."

"Gimme 'at bottle out of the compartment."

I opened the glove compartment, found a bottle of liquor, uncapped it and handed it to him.

"You wanna drink?" he said.

"No. I'm not driving."

He tilted the bottle to one side and watched the road while he drank. It was a big drink, judging from the number of times he swallowed. He set the bottle between his thighs.

"Now I'm gonna show you somethin'," he said, and reached behind him and brought up his gun. "Watch, boy." Without slowing the car, he began to fire into the darkness on his left, and I heard the noise of shattering glass. He was shooting at the insulators on the power lines and hitting them.

"Pretty good," I said.

He thought so too. "Reckon I ain't much hand with women, but I sure can handle a firin' piece."

He put the gun away and took another long drink from the bottle. "You a good boy," he said. "I'm gonna he'p you. See you take care and train right. You gonna do your roadwork ever' morning."

"You gonna let me out to do it?"

"Umm." He shook his head. "Can' let you do 'at, rightly 'nough. You bein' a prisoner and all. But now, you take and run round that tier. Say, fifty times." He mumbled to himself, making some calculations. "Fifty times'd be near two miles."

"Running indoors isn't much good, Sheriff. I need to

get a lot of air into my lungs. And I should box three or four rounds every day."

"Huh?"

"Another thing. We could rig up a heavy bag in one of the cells."

"Hell's fire, boy. You in plenty good shape right now." He raised the bottle and drank. "Ain't no need for you to fret so," he said. "You done beat Valiant one time, the shape you in."

"What if he doesn't want to fight me again? You'll have to find someone else."

"Boy you sure frettin' more'n you oughta. Me and Andy Crumbaugh gonna see about everything."

"I guess you can always arrest Valiant and hold him till he agrees to fight, huh?"

The sheriff laughed loudly. "Hah. 'At's a funny i-dear, boy."

I decided to ask him about moving my cell. "Mine is a damned rat's rest," I said.

"I'll tell Bubber to let you move. You can have Grimm's old cell."

He stopped the car at the rear of the jail. I picked up my book, and we went in together and woke up the turnkey, who was asleep in a chair. Bubber woke slowly, yawning and stretching his thin arms.

"It's you," he said. "Har you feelin'?"

"OK." I was ready for a go at the shadowboxing championship of the world.

Bubber unlocked the door and I entered the cell block hoping to find Cicero. But the room was empty, and the snores of the men asleep in the cells made it seem desolate. I climbed the stairs and went into the cell where I had seen Fred Grimm sleeping. I took off my shoes, put the book under the mattress near my head and lay thinking of Sissie.

When sleep came, I dreamed an old dream. But this time the girl was Sissie.

We were swimming toward each other from opposite sides of a turbulent river, rising and falling with every wave, but drawing closer stroke by stroke. Then there was the final, terrifyingly near yet drawing-away wave,

and we were together on the crest of it, holding on and exhausted of everything but tenderness.

I felt myself being shaken and heard the turnkey say, "Get up, boy. It's near ten o'clock."

I raised my head. It throbbed a little, and the cut on my chin felt stiff and raw. The turnkey gave me a cardboard box which held an orange, three egg sandwiches and a container of milk.

"Sheriff said to tell you about doin' your roadwork."

"Not today. I'm breaking training today. I'll start again tomorrow."

"I'm tellin' you like he told me to, boy."

The turnkey left me. I got the book out from under the mattress, propped it against the cardboard box and opened the pages to the play, *King Lear*, which Grimm had been reading. I ate slowly as I read, wanting to finish my breakfast and the play at the same time. But I had eaten the last of the sandwiches and drunk the last sip of milk by the time I arrived at the point in the play where King Lear tells his daughter Cordelia: "Come, let's away to prison. We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage."

I closed the book and went out to the catwalk and looked down. Cicero was spreading a wet handkerchief on top of the radiator at the side of the room. The Texan with the fancy belt stood nearby, showing Cicero a hard face.

I dressed and went down, wanting to speak to Cicero. As I approached him, some of the prisoners standing near him stepped back, looking quickly at me. Cicero's smile seemed tight and forced.

"What's up?" I asked him, feeling the tension all around me.

"Whyn't yew ask me?" the Texan said, fingering the buckle on his belt.

"OK, I ask you."

I knew it was coming but I waited. It seemed a long time.

"Yew can't be so tough an' a Jew too," the Texan said.

He saw me coming and was ready with his belt. The buckle flashed through the air and I threw up my arm.

The buckle struck my wrist, slicing the skin, and I punched him squarely in the face. He fell back, lifted his leg and kicked me in the chest. He swung the belt again, but I caught it and tore it loose from his hand. He was wild with a punch and it gave me time to recover. I slashed at his face and head again and again. He sprang at me and tried to grab the belt, and I hit him on the jaw with my fist. His head struck the radiator and he fell. I chopped at his head with the buckle as he lay on the floor. Then someone rushed in and pulled me away, and I saw it was the deputy, Dero. The sheriff was coming fast from the office.

Dero continued to hold me while the sheriff went over to examine the Texan. I saw the sheriff kneel. Then he raised his head and called two men from the group behind me.

"You carry this boy to my office," the sheriff said. "And the rest of you get in your cells." He asked me, "What you been fightin' about?"

Cicero said, "The man tried to cold-cock him with his damn belt buckle."

"He ain't talking to you," Dero said. "Get in your cell."

Cicero walked away slowly, looking back over his shoulder. The sheriff turned to me and put out his hand. "Gimme that belt, boy."

"I want to keep it. I won it."

He took it from me. "It don't belong to you," he said, and put his hand on my arm. "Now you go on back to your cell."

The sheriff and the deputy went out, and the room became very quiet. I walked to the stairway and climbed up and entered my cell. I felt listless, and when I tried to read, the words seemed foreign. I put down the book, shielded my eyes and fell asleep.

I was awakened by the sounds of commotion in the cell block. I swung off the bed and went out to the catwalk. Down below, the turnkey was herding a group of men, including Cicero, toward the door.

"Hey," I called out, and Cicero waved.

The turnkey said, "C'mon now, all you train riders. You gettin' out."

I saw Harrington, my former next-door neighbor, and asked him, "What's going on?"

"I hear they lettin' all you train riders go," he said. "To make room for some new prisoners—moonshiners. Appears the federal men put on a big raid last evenin'."

I hurried downstairs, and when the turnkey saw me he shook his head. "Not you, boy. You stayin' with us."

"What?"

"Sheriff's orders."

"Where is he?"

"He'll be back directly. You ask him." He let the last of the departing men out and closed the door behind him. I turned back to the stairway and ran up the steps and went along the catwalk to the windows in the far wall. I hoped to see Cicero and to call out to him. I did see someone on the highway who looked like Cicero in the fading light, and I searched along the window for a way to open it. But the window was sealed firmly. I felt frightened, the fear rising in me, causing the skin to tighten over my scalp.

I heard new sounds behind me in the cell block and turned. Dero and the turnkey stood in the midst of the new group of prisoners, directing them to various cells. I guessed that the sheriff had returned, and ran to his office to see.

Sheriff Burden swung around in his swivel chair when I entered his office. "Say, you put us both in bad trouble, boy."

"It's a damn swindle."

"Umm." He shook his head. "Now I'm forced to hold you. You beat that boy Tex real bad."

Dero, the deputy, came in and leaned against the sheriff's desk and smiled, probably pleased by the way I looked.

"Folks been asking me questions," the sheriff said. "The County Prosecutor, for one. Now we got to wait and see what happens to that boy in the hospital."

I stepped back and turned around and shook the door to call the turnkey.

"You wait up, boy," the sheriff said. "You know I'm gonna he'p you all I can. You my boy."

The turnkey stood in my way, and the sheriff went on.

"One more thing. We got to change your cell. Dero'll show you where you stay."

The deputy came up and grasped my arm above the elbow and guided me toward a cell in a corner of the lower tier.

"You go on in, now," Dero said.

"Now? Why?"

"Go on," he said. His hand moved toward his shoulder holster, but instead of pulling his gun he pushed me into the cell. I heard the door slam behind me and the sound of a lock and then there was a sudden silence.

And my fear, feeding on the silence, grew like a wild plant, filling the space around me, making me shrink inside myself. I was more frightened than I had ever been in a whole life of being afraid. And I could not now, as in the past, try to overcome the fear by embracing it, by doing the thing I was afraid to do. There wasn't anything to do.

I sat on the bed and repeated every bitter word I knew, hoping that one of them would give me an anodyne against the fear, but the words had long before been drained of all substance.

I didn't hear the turnkey at the door and was only distantly aware of him as he unlocked the bolt and came in.

"You awright, boy?" he asked. He carried a paper box in both hands. "Got you a present."

I showed no interest and he made a disapproving sound with his tongue. "That ain't the way to do," he said, and put the box on the bed beside me. I saw that the box had come from Noreen's Inn and had been opened.

"Fried chicken," the turnkey said. "And safe to eat. We didn't find no hacksaw blade in it." He laughed.

I wanted him to leave me, but he wasn't ready. "I'll be by in the mornin'," he said. "Long's you here, Sheriff Burden wants you to take care. And I'm to see that you do your roadwork every day now."

The Returning

Daniel De Paola

It was the only house he had seen in three days; it nestled just at the base of the foothills which led to the Mexican border. For a long time, he sat in the brush and wondered whether he should chance it. His throat was so dry he couldn't swallow; his mouth and lips were sore from lack of water and he felt that if he didn't get some kind of food in his stomach soon, it wouldn't make any difference whether he made the border or not.

He moved closer; from fifty yards away, he could see only a few chickens inside the fence; there was no other sign of life, no sounds, no smoke coming from the chimney though it was nearing sundown. Whoever lived out here in such isolation must be independent and have a mind of his own, he thought. It didn't have to follow that they would suspect him just because he was an Indian. And perhaps they might even give him some food and water.

He went very slowly now; many of these outlying places had dogs to keep a watch. When he was satisfied there was none, he was no more than a score of paces from the fence. At this point, he noted that the front door was ajar about a foot or so; this added to the strangeness of the place. The wind blew in gusts and he saw dust in small clouds swirl up on the porch and some of it enter the house. That and the quiet made him see there was something very odd about this place.

In a moment, he was up on the porch. After looking at the horizon, he squinted in beyond the door and saw a dust-covered living room, old furniture, and faded walls. There was no one about and he entered; then he heard

the heavy breathing, like sighing from another room. The door on the left was half open, and when he reached it he heard the breathing more clearly. He pushed the door back silently and looked into a bedroom; and on the bed was a white woman and a small baby in her arms.

They were very sick, he saw close up; they seemed in a heavy, unnatural sleep, almost like a coma. The woman coughed several times, a harsh, wracking cough that left her breathing all the louder. Her face was a deathly white and her eyelids trembled but never opened. The baby was exhaling quickly in a hoarse tone; on closer look, he saw the reddish tinge of its throat and neck. Then he felt he knew what was wrong with them.

He looked all over the house quickly until he found a kerosene lamp in the kitchen; he took the top off, dipped a piece of cloth in it, and went back to the bedroom where he rubbed both their throats with it. With more kerosene-soaked cloths wrapped around their throats, he used one wad at the end of a spoon to coat the insides of their throats with more of the spirit, a device he had seen his own mother use many years ago when he and his sisters had had diphtheria.

After he had a sip of water and munched on a hard piece of bread he found, he began the second phase of his treatment. With a damp towel, he washed down both their bodies, then laid the baby out alongside the mother who still wanted to hold it even in her condition. He then found two heavy blankets and threw them over the two patients. They slept on while he sat near and wondered what else he could do.

He recalled one old uncle saying that sufferers from the throat sickness seemed to get some relief from breathing fumes of gun powder. Having only a knife, he began another search of the house. But though he could find no weapons or shells about, he did find a can out on the back porch which was half-filled with kerosene; this he brought into the kitchen and placed under the table for use later.

Back in the bedroom, he redampened the cloth around their necks and felt their pulses and foreheads. They were still very hot and uneasy, but their breathing didn't sound quite so rough as it had earlier. He placed

the chair near the window and gazed out. It was a lonely stretch—a few small trees beyond the small patch of prairie, and then the rocky slope leading up. A woman and baby here meant that there had to be a man about; and for a long time he thought of fleeing before the man returned. But then he saw a cow come into view around back and it made him see how thoughtless he had been.

He got a small fire going in the stove and put a pot of water on; he found some jelled soup in a larder and put that on the stove too to heat up. Then he took another small pan and went out to the cow which he milked for a long time before she would stand still long enough to give him a small amount. This too he put on the stove. He rechecked his patients and went outside to bring in more wood, to get the fire as hot as possible.

While he drank a small bit of the warm soup, he looked at the needlework in the dining room and scanned the living room which had small poems hanging up on the walls. One was entitled "Bless This Home," and another was a prayer to the Lord to give the occupants fortitude and patience. He stood before a third one a long time, reading "Everyman is me, I am his brother. No man is my enemy. I am Everyman and He is Myself."

Out on the porch, he looked back the way he had come. Ten days and one man's life back, he had left the reservation, vowing never to return to that shameful bondage. But no sooner had he set out on his way west than the chief notified the Indian agent, who sent several deputies to recapture him. He recalled how they had separated and the one had guessed his next move back in the Diablo mountains, surprising him in a narrow rocky pass. He had only wanted to get away; he hadn't wanted to stab the man who had been so careless and heavy-handed as to miss the knife in his pants and to cuss him out for a dumb injun who didn't know when he was well off.

He took the deputy's horse and rode south for three days before it fell to the ground, unable to move any farther or stand. He had gone about a hundred yards away when he turned and saw the buzzards circling in the sky above it. Throwing curses at them as a kind of relief and cover, he went back, drew his knife, and made a cut deep in the horse's neck. He sat near it, glaring up at the

black birds while the life of the animal oozed out into the thick sandy stubble around them.

After he had been walking for a long while, he turned and looked back. He saw the birds beginning to glide lower and lower until they landed; and he tried to find some solace in the memory of the tribe elders explaining how buzzards and other ghouls helped keep the prairies clean. He tried to think of that but it didn't do much good. Just as it had never done any good to think of what the elders had said about their being brought into reservations. The whites *had* grown too numerous and powerful; his own people *had* grown weaker and fewer in number. It was a fact of life they had to accept in the long run. But even so, he did his best not to think about it. Things were bad enough without basking in their defeat.

So when the prospect of undergoing another summer of skimpy planting and harvesting on reservations faced him again, some weeks back, he began to drink all the more to bolster the decision he had made soon after they had been placed on the government land some two years before. And when the chief and several elders warned him two or three times in the past weeks, he knew the time had come. But before he could make a well-planned departure with supplies and a horse, he got into an argument with another man over a squaw and almost killed him in a fight; thus, before the elders could decide on his punishment, he slipped away one night with only the clothes he wore and his knife.

Knowing he had talked many times of heading west if and when he jumped the reservation, he decided to strike south instead, to throw off pursuers sent out by the chief and the agent. But they soon picked up his trail, and for a time he was desperate with the fear of being brought back to his people—not for the punishment they might set up for him, but for the shame he would have to bear, like an unruly hapless prisoner being brought back to his prison. He told himself many times that he would endure almost anything but that.

It was their passivity that he had found most unbearable back on the reservation. Not only had they become like orphans waiting for the charity of the whites, but the chief and his people seemed satisfied to get less and less

of what they were originally promised. More than once, he and several other braves had told the chief it was shameful for them, a tribe once as strong as the Blackfeet, to accept each new insult without so much as a word of complaint. But the chief had always promised to talk to the agent and never did; he knew full well if he dared to complain another elder would soon be chief and receiving the little favors from the agent.

True, there had often been unrest and talk of deserting the reservation; but it had always occurred when men were drinking or bitter over the agent's shortcomings. Generally, the families accepted the few blankets and cows and horses and said that perhaps they were better off than other lone tribes who starved in bad weather. And when he had tried to argue that other tribes, even if some of them were starving, were still real people and not slaves to the whites, often he had been told that if he felt that way, why did he stay?

All through the night, he bathed and rebathed the patients with hot cloths and painted their throats. Once or twice he tried to get some soup down them but it didn't work. So he kept them warm and continued to watch them when he wasn't out on the porch, watching the night. He wondered if he should continue south tomorrow or turn west as he had originally planned. He had heard tales of the opportunities in the Pacific Northwest or even up in the Yukon. Mexico was too close and offered only more land to flee through. He was weary and wanted to stop somewhere.

He dozed off in his chair and woke just before sunup; the woman was awake and saw him. She tried to sit up but was too weak; he moved to her and smiled down at her. "Are you feeling better?"

"Who are you?" Then before he could answer, she turned to her baby and held it close. "Is she going to be all right?"

"She is better," he nodded.

The woman scrutinized the baby for a moment and saw it was true. "Did you take care of her?"

He nodded again.

"Who are you?"

"I was passing and saw you were sick."

She looked over his dark, angular face, his stiff clothes and the way his odd appearance filled the room. "Are you a doctor?"

"No, but I've seen this sickness before."

She gazed at him. "It was very good of you to stop and help us."

"Is there no one else here? You have a husband?"

"He left a few days ago, he works for the sheriff of the county."

"Will he be back soon?"

"I don't know."

"You have no friends near, to help?"

"Only over in town," she said.

He nodded and told her, "You mustn't talk more. Rest, and I will stay until you are better."

When he had tucked her and the baby in and resumed his seat by the window, he found her eyes on him. "What is your name?" she asked.

"Nachobi," he said, giving the first name which came to him.

She smiled faintly and said, "Well, I'm very grateful to you."

When she slept again, he rose and went outside. Odd how the name of a dead kinsman had come to his lips, one who had been killed in battle and not been like those on the reservation. But then he realized it wasn't so odd after all; when he was a boy, his father had told him all the great names and he still remembered so many—Nachobi, Pionsomen, Long Face, Diniseau, and Laughing Cat after whom his father had wanted to name him. His mother had compromised on Darkcat, used as a white man's last name, and had given him the first name of Willis, after an agent she had admired.

He wondered if the woman's husband was on his trail too. Perhaps not, since the reservation was up in Oklahoma; but he did know that he couldn't afford to remain here much longer. The deputy had to be coming home soon, and he wasn't going to like having Willis here, no matter what he had done for the woman and baby. He told himself that he would leave sometime this day, as soon as the woman was strong enough to get food for him.

by. In the meanwhile, he could keep checking with her the location of her husband.

He stood by the window of the bedroom and gazed in the woman. He wondered if his several women friends the tribe still spoke of him, although it was probably forbidden by the chief; and he wondered too if his old mother was being shunned by others because of this so-called shame. He pictured the small, bony woman with teeth, who always watched him with those sad eyes when he grew from a wild boyhood into a bitter manhood; and he could still hear her saying, "You must see that we have to live thinner days now. Our ancestors, if they were alive with us, would be living just as we are." And he would never believe that; he told her more than once when drinking, that the ancestors would never accept such a trammled life, they would erupt like a river over its banks.

He never got over feeling that he had been cursed in the time he was born; his life had spanned the whole decline and thus the memories he had as a boy led him to an empty maturity. Often when he had been a small boy, he had seen great chiefs and heard of victories over the whites. His father and his uncles had shown him bits of the glory; he had been like an observer of the epoch and didn't know until many years later that the epoch had been closing. If he had been born thirty years later, perhaps he would have listened to his mother's words and not felt quite so much dissatisfaction with himself and his people.

He had often envied the braves who had adapted themselves to the new life; they had taken their wives and bits of land and begun to work as any white would on a homestead. When Willis and other drunken braves gathered late at night, they talked of these "white braves" and scoffed at their methods and outlook. And he joined with the most scornful tones and sarcastic laugh. But when he was alone, he now and then wondered if perhaps the white braves weren't the wisest of their tribe. Most of the time, however, he tried not to think of them and never had anything to do with them.

If he knew he could never enter into the white braves' mode of life, he knew also that the existence of his cro-

nies was as bad or worse. Night after night of drinking and lechering, gaming and fighting, was like letting off the pent-up emotion of his wasting years. Now and again he woke up with a hangover lying among a bunch of sprawled forms and felt he was a bigger fool than any of them. He too was becoming old and paunchy and idiotic. But when the others got up and did a little work to get money for more liquor, he sat around staring at the circle of the horizon. That was when his anger would reach its whitest pitch: their ancestors had roamed the continent from one coast to another and here they were confined to a three-hundred-square-mile plot like fishes in a lake.

He found a small bottle later and put some warm milk in it for the baby; the mother woke up and fed it while he watched. The mother seemed stronger now; her fever was down and she didn't cough too often. As the baby drank slowly, she gazed up at Willis.

"Do you have to be moving on?"

"Yes, I do. I was waiting to see if you were better. Does your throat hurt much?"

"A little, but I'm much better, thanks to you."

She gazed down at her baby drinking.

"She looks better too," he said.

"Yes, she does, I don't know what we would've done without you."

He asked her how it had all happened and she told him that she and the baby had been hit almost simultaneously with a sudden fever and sore throat; then coughing and dizziness set in so that she had to take to her bed. He told her he had had diphtheria as a boy and had remembered some of the symptoms and treatments.

She smiled at him and said, "It was divine providence that you happened by."

He asked if her husband often stayed away this long and she replied he did when his job demanded it, knowing she could take care of herself and the baby. "Until this time," she smiled.

He asked if she could swallow some soup and she said she would try. He brought some in to her and sat at the window as she drank it. She was a fairly young woman, hardy-looking, with a round face and long blonde hair.

Between sips, she asked where he came from and where he was bound. He made up a story of heading for a job in some Mexican gold fields. She said she wished he would stay long enough to receive the thanks of her husband who was probably on his way home by now. But that if he didn't, she would understand.

For a moment they were silent; he sat next to the window watching her and she, between turning to the baby and drinking her soup, was looking over at him. At another time and place, he wouldn't have wanted to linger in a room alone with a white woman. He had heard of more than one Indian in such an instance being accused of everything from attempted assault to terrorizing a helpless female. But here and now there was only friendliness between them; it was a kind of kinship he had never felt toward a white before. It made him think of the words he had read in the living room.

He saw that the woman was still weak; he took away the bottle and dish, and told her he would stay a while longer until she got a little more rest. She smiled tiredly and said it was very good of him, she didn't know how to thank him. He resumed his post at the window and took to scanning the northern prairie. He knew he was stretching his luck; if he was smart, he would wait until she dozed off and then leave. But somehow he just couldn't.

The longer he sat, however, the more restive he became. He began to think of the times his people had suffered at the hands of the whites, mainly for trusting the whites too much. One of his uncles had taught him early the saying that an Indian should trust the whites but keep his knife sharp. Perhaps the woman would never hurt him after what he had done for her, but the husband was something else again. He went outside and thought about what he should do.

While he tried to make a plan, he milked the cow, chopped more wood, fed the chickens, and cleaned the pots he had used. Then he brought several buckets of water in from the well out back; afterward, he went into the bedroom to see if she was awake. She was dozing and he took the chair to wait.

It was almost noon when she woke up. He smiled at

her when she glanced over, and he said, "Feeling stronger?"

"Yes, very much so."

"I thought after I got you and the baby a lunch, I would leave."

"Of course; we've kept you far too long already. In fact, I think I can get up now." She started to sit up and he moved to her.

"Not yet," he told her. "Have some more soup and take a few more hours of rest. You will feel much better by evening."

"Maybe you're right." She lay back. "You're the doctor here."

He returned to the kitchen and got the soup ready. While she fed the baby and had some herself, she said she had to pay him in some way for all this help. He tried to protest but she insisted. "Is your horse rested and fed?" she asked. When he told her he had no horse, she said, "There's the answer; you'll take our spare horse."

"I couldn't do that," he said.

"But you must."

"It's kind of you, generous, but I can't take your horse."

For the next few moments, she kept insisting and he kept refusing. He had a pretty good idea of what would happen if he was caught with a white man's horse. Back at the window, he noted a puff of dust in the distance. While he listened to her, he saw it grow until he could make out the form of a man on a horse. When she saw him gazing out, she asked, "Is someone coming?"

"Yes," he told her.

"It must be Jim, my husband." Perhaps she guessed his feelings, for she added, "I'm so glad he's come home before you left. I want to tell him all you've done for us."

He listened to her talk about moving closer to town and all the while he kept glancing at the approaching rider. Soon he could hear the hooves of the horse hitting the ground and presently the rider was coming through the fence up to the house.

"That's him, I can tell by the sound," she said. When they heard steps on the porch, she sat up and called out,

"Jim? I'm in here." The man then came into the bedroom.

As he moved to his wife, he grew aware of Willis near the window. He stopped and stared at the Indian.

"This is Mr. Nachobi," the woman told him. "And if he hadn't come along yesterday, I don't know what you would've found here today." While the cowboy regarded the Indian searchingly, she gave him the whole story, laying a special stress on how Willis had worked like a doctor with only crude tools to save both her and the baby. The cowboy was around thirty, tall and lean, with the hard look of a man much in the saddle. He had fair skin and light eyes, which looked hard and soft at the same time. Now they seemed friendly as he said, "I'm much obliged to you; it was a damn fine thing you did here."

Willis nodded and waited.

"I told Mr. Nachobi that he had to take Daisy in payment," the woman went on. "He has no horse of his own and this is the least we can do. Don't you think so?"

"Of course," said the cowboy. "No buts about it, after all he did for us." He bent over his baby, eyed it closely, and then kissed it on the head. He then caressed the woman and looked back at Willis.

"He was just going to leave when you came," the woman told her husband.

"Sure glad you were here for me to thank you," he said to Willis.

"But I think he has to be on his way now," she went on.

The cowboy turned questioningly to Willis, who said this was true.

"Well then, I'll saddle up Daisy for you."

Willis said goodbye to the woman and followed the man out back. He watched the cowboy bring the mare out of the barn and throw a saddle over her. After he had tightened the cinches and patted the horse, he turned and studied the Indian. "You're Darkcat, aren't you?"

Now the blue eyes were cold and challenging. And Willis said it was so.

"I thought so as soon as I saw you." After a pause the

cowboy went on, "For what you did, I can never repay you. It was as good as I've ever seen; not many white men would've done it." Another long pause. "We got the word on you last week and we found Jorgensen, the man you killed." Their eyes met and locked. "You know I can't let you go, don't you?" said the cowboy.

"I know," nodded Willis.

"All right. But for saving my wife and baby, I can give you a day."

Willis stared, not understanding.

"I've been in the saddle for five days, so I'm taking a day's rest. By then my wife'll be up and I can leave again. And then I'm coming out after you. Understand?"

"I understand," said Willis.

"She's a good horse." He patted the mare. "She'll give you all she's got, you won't have to drive her much." He put a canteen of water up over the saddle horn and asked Willis if he wanted any food.

Willis refused, and they stood in silence. "Well," said Willis finally, "I'll leave now." He swung up into the saddle and gazed down at the man.

"I'll be starting out tomorrow about this time," said the cowboy.

Willis nodded.

"And make no mistake about it, I mean to get you."

"I understand," Willis repeated.

He moved the mare south toward the hills; he turned once and saw the cowboy still watching him. And he knew he was in for more and now perhaps even harder pursuit.

The farther he rode, the less did he feel the cowboy had been boyish or silly or downright crazy. He saw that even amid the whites, there was still a touch of the old, undying spirit. And he felt he was closer to this blue-eyed white man than to any of his own people. When they finally did meet again over a gun or knife, it would be a more fitting finish for either than anything else that might come their way.

The Transient

Stanley Elkin

EVERYBODY dies. Everybody. But no one really believes it. They read the papers. They see the newsreels. They drive past the graveyards on the outskirts of town. Do you think that makes any difference? It does not! No one believes in death. Except me. Boswell. *I* believe in it. Listen, John Burgoyne was born in 1722 and died in 1792. The dates of Louis XVI were 1754 to 1793. (Do you suppose that Louis knew of Burgoyne's death? Do you suppose he said, "Ah, he's gone now, the old campaigner?" Do you suppose he suspected he'd be dead in a year himself?) More. Spenser: 1552 (?) to 1599. Caesar: 102 (or 100) to 44 B.C. Do you notice how as one goes back the birthdays become less certain while the year of death is always absolute, fixed? Do you think that's an accident? It's because death is realer than life. I saw a sign on U.S. 41 in Kentucky. It said REMEMBER YOU MUST DIE. I remember. But I never needed the sign. I had my own father. My father was a healthy man. Content. Vigorous. Powerful. Well. But when he died, he died of everything. The cancer. The blindness. The swollen heart. The failed markets. But even that, the death of one's father in a hospital room, the kiss goodbye inside the oxygen tent, isn't enough for some people. Even if they stretch a point and come to believe in the death of others, they refuse to believe in their own.

I remember reading in the newspaper an interview with the murderer, Braddock, when I was a kid. Braddock, waiting in the death house, told the reporter, "When they pull that switch they'll be pulling it on the whole world. Nobody will outlive me. The warden. The other cons.

You. Nobody. Everybody dies when I die." He could believe in a fantastic short circuit that would end the world but not in his own lonely mortality. Do you suppose only a murderer thinks that way? Go on, when they pulled that switch Braddock knew for the first time what it was like to *be* a murderer. He murdered everybody. And don't you think he didn't close his eyes two seconds before he had to, just to make sure? Even my father, my own father, when I kneeled beside his bed in that white white stinking room, looked at me and there was blood in his eyes. Why he's angry, I thought. He's mad at me.

I'm different. I remember I must die. It explains everything.

Once I wrestled. I was an athlete. (But I am no sports man. Scores bore me.) To ward off death I built my body. A fortress, I hid in it. I laid low.

The locker room was my hometown, the gymnasium my university. There I moved for years with steamy abandon inside my glazy body, warm under the tape on wrist, the hygienically bandaged knee joint, my muscles smoothly piling and meshing like tumblers in a lock. I was interested in a cautious, planned development of the body part, a sort of T.V.A. of the flesh, an aggrandizement of torso and limbs as real and grand as the cultivation of any hothouse bulb. I worked steadily, absently without either sorrow or joy. Straining at the weights developed everything, watching with a kind of pride the steady ballooning of my parts, growing taller, wider, expanding, blooming, becoming. For four years I weighed myself each night on the tall, free scale. For four years sat naked and wet on the low, peeling bench by my locker, making with others the rude, brutal shoptalk of athletes or drying myself with the intense absorption of a soldier cleaning his weapon.

It was death I trained against, I tell you.

I moved out of my room and into the gym. There lying on the tumblers' mats at night, my covers a half dozen volleyball nets, I wondered what I would do with my life.

What, I asked myself, were the purposes of strength?

Why to pull, to push, to raise, to squeeze, to win—to win!

I answered an ad in a physical-culture magazine. Frank Alconi, the Jersey City manager of wrestlers, needed men. I sent photos, nine-by-eleven glossies of myself under the weights. He sent me fare. I went to Jersey City. I became a wrestler.

Alconi threw me into the ring at once. I was already strong, of course, and Alconi said I was a natural, but for a long time I didn't know what I was doing. I was supposed to lose anyway, so it didn't make much difference to the ring world, but I was traveling up and down the East Coast from Jersey City to Raleigh, North Carolina, in what might be described as precariously ambulatory condition. My memories of those first weeks are chiefly memories of liniment. My body was like some great northern forest, one part of which was always on fire. The other wrestlers kept telling me what a good sport I was and visited me at the rubbing table afterward. Beating me up made them feel young again. They liked to feel my muscles. Often, lying on the rubbing table near unconsciousness and death in the unheated basement of a civic auditorium, I would look up into the gap-toothed smile of ancient apes. They would stand there for a while, lost in wonder, and then, tracing their prehensile fingers over the bumps and hollows of my flesh, point with an inverted pride at their own tough and lumpy bodies, which looked, from the angle at which I saw them, like great red hairy mounds of meat. Then these fellows would shrug, put on their pin-striped businessmen's suits, snap their *Wall Street Journals* smartly under their arm-pits, and go off with a wave to lose themselves among the traveling salesmen in the hotel lobby. In those days druggists went blind mixing special liniments to keep me alive.

When I got back to Jersey City I told Alconi I would have to have more training.

Alconi grinned. "Tough, I thought you was tough. Rough, huh? Trip's been rough?"

"A cob, Mr. Alconi."

"Sure. It's the gym does it. All the time developing yourself against instruments, against metal, when what you need's contact with human beings. Where's the fight in a barbell?"

"That must be it," I said.

"Sure," Alconi said. "You need the old smash." He ground his fist against his palm. "The old kaboom. The old grrr-rr-agh." He pulled some air down out of the sky, cradled it in the crook of his right elbow, and strangled it. "The old splat cratch." He kneed an invisible back. "The old fffapp!" He grabbed handfuls of invisible hair and gouged invisible holes in invisible eye sockets.

"With all due respect, Mr. Alconi, that's not what I need. That's what I've been getting. What I need is to learn to protect myself against that."

"Sure," he said. "I understand, kid. Only I'm not your trainer, you realize. As your manager I get thirty-four percent of your purses. As your trainer I'd be entitled to another"—he considered my bruises—"fifteen percent."

"Sure," I said.

"That would still leave you with fifty-one percent of yourself. You'd be in command."

"Chairman of the Board, as it were," I said.

"Yeah." Alconi laughed. "That's right. Chairman of the Board."

I slept on it. The next day I went up to Alconi again. "Who'd pay expenses?" I asked. I had been paying my own.

Alconi frowned. "What the hell," he said, "we'll take the railroad expenses off the top, the gross. We'll split it."

"OK," I said.

We signed a new contract and I went back to my hotel and renewed auld lang syne with a pharmacist I'd been keeping.

In the morning Alconi called me over to his office in the gym. "Boswell," he said, "you lucked out. I got a class of ladies starting Monday and I'm registering you."

"Ladies?"

"*Girls. Female wrestlers.*"

"You want me to train with girls?" I said.

"Boswell," he said, winking evilly, "it's better than barbells."

"Sure," I said.

"The coming thing," he said. "Lady wrestlers. The wave of the future. I can foresee the time when there'll be

girl tag teams, girl midgets, interracial girl wrestling, mixed matches with men."

"Interracial mixed matches with men?" I asked.

"Let's go slow," he said.

So I trained with ladies. At first I was shy. After all, it's an odd feeling to see the world strapped across the thick, broad shoulders of some nubile young lady, an extraordinary concept to be struggling for air nuzzled against the breast of some matronly female giant. But I got used to it and even began to enjoy it. Ultimately, for everyone's protection, Alconi's male instructor had to put me on a private crash program. It wasn't the same. I emerged from my training somewhat better prepared for the professional knockabout I had engaged for. I had learned, as Alconi put it, to fall. This is useful knowledge.

I went forth.

I was small time. I started the evening, or ended it, or filled in on tag teams, but for a year I wrestled everywhere, earning, curiously, different reputations in different parts of the country. In the South, for example, I nearly always won. (Alconi explained why. I was, as Bogolub, the big promoter in Los Angeles, was also to tell me later, clean-cut, a Protestant, Mr. Universe type, Anglo-Saxon all the way up.) But in the coal-mining Middle Atlantic States, and for the same reasons that I was let to win in the South, I always lost. Elsewhere it was the same pattern. Here a winner. There a loser. Only in the democratic racially indifferent West did I win and lose. I was earning a little more money now, though the fact that the instructor had to give me private lessons upped Alconi's take a couple of percent and I was no longer Chairman of the Board.

It went like that, as I say, for about a year. Then, just after Alconi died, I had a row with Bogolub in Los Angeles.

Bogolub insisted his wrestlers have at least three sessions in the gym before they went on. I had complained to him that I thought the act got stale if it was rehearsed too often. "I don't think so," Bogolub said. He's a tiny man, white-faced, like someone with a heart condition. He goes in a limousine which he drives himself to all the

gyms in the city to watch his wrestlers. "I don't think so," he said. "I think practice makes perfect."

"I can't agree," I told him. "That's what makes horse racing," he said, pointing vaguely toward the ring. He shrugged and went off with Felix Bush, the Schenectad Stalwart, to work out on the mat. (My kind doesn't even get to use the practice ring.) Bogolub watched me carefully. It was almost half an hour after our talk, but he continued as if there had been no interruption. "In addition," he said, "you are just a tanker. The biggest men the *biggest*, work out the routine in the gym before match."

To prove to Bogolub that practice did not make perfect—to prove *nothing of the sort: to reserve to my life a certain limited spontaneity*—I let Felix Bush beat me the next night in a match I was supposed to win.

Bogolub came into the locker room. I was still in the shower.

"BOSWELL!"

"Boswell?" I pretended not to hear him.

"Boswell you in there? You hear me? You in there? Well I hope you're in there because that's where you wash up and that's what you are, you understand? Washed up! No more in L.A. do you wrestle for me in my gardens with the television and the hook-ups to San Francisco and all the way up to Portland, Oregon. That all finished, tanker. A guy that can't win a fixed fight. Wash up good, you hear me? I'm paying for the soap and I say to you you are welcome because you are washed up in Los Angeles, do you understand me?"

"Yes. Beat it."

"Beat it? Beat it? Do you threaten me, phony? I better not understand you to threaten me because I got guys who sell popcorn for me in this place who can whip you. You're finished."

I came out of the shower and went over to my locker. Bogolub followed and stared at me while I dried myself. It always makes me nervous when people look at me when I'm naked. Even girls. I turned my back.

"Dry up good, do you understand me?" Bogolub said.

"Please," I said wearily. "Mr. Bogolub."

"No no, my boy," Bogolub said gently, "you miss me."

meaning. You shouldn't catch cold. You missed a spot on your back. Where the yellow streak is, *that's still wet!*"

I turned to face him. "Look," I said.

"Show me your behind again. I can't stand to look at your face," Bogolub said.

I shrugged.

"Why did Felix Bush beat you?" Bogolub demanded.

"I was Bushed," I said.

"Pig stink," he said.

"Get out of here, Mr. Bogolub."

"Get out of here, Mr. Bogolub," he mimicked. "Get out of here, Mr. Bogolub." And then, in his own voice, "No tanker tells me to get out of my own place. *You* get out. You get dressed and get out. And that reminds me, I meant to tell you before. Why do you wear those crummy clothes? You look like something in a playground. I pay you. Wrestlers make good money. Ain't you proud of your profession?"

"Wrestling is not my profession."

"That's right. Not any more. Not in Los Angeles it ain't."

"OK."

"OK! You *bet* OK! A tanker who can't win a fight that I go to the trouble to fix it for him. With rehearsals yet. Let me tell you something, Mr. America, let me tell you something about the economics of this profession."

Despite myself I was instantly alert. All shoptalk excites me, everybody's trade secrets are important to me. I can't help it. Men die. Knowledge is power. Power is a sort of health too. It was all I could do to keep from putting my arm around Bogolub, from offering him a swallow of my mineral water.

"You don't know yet the damage you done tonight, do you, tanker? Contracts have been made, do you understand that? How am I going to juggle all those contracts? Bush was supposed to fight Fat Smith here next month. Maybe he won't. Maybe you ruined it for him too. It's something I got to figure it out. How can Smith go against him now? He was on the card last week and lost to the Chink. Maybe you don't remember the terrific beating you give to the Chink yourself last time you was here, but the public remembers. So right away it's an

overmatch. A winner against a loser. It's inconsistent. Where's the interest? A guy like Bush is supposed to lose in Los Angeles. All of a sudden he beats a contender."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. In the long-range geometry. I had plans for you. Clean cut. A Mr. Universe type."

"I didn't know about that," I said.

"Big shot. Vigilante. Takes things into his own hands and doesn't know what he's doing."

"What difference does it make? So Bush wins one fight. Who's going to think about it that way?"

"*Think* about it? *Think* about it? Who said anything about anyone thinking about it? It's the *feeling* of the thing. The balance. That's what makes a good card. You queered that. Now I'll have to readjust outcomes all the way up the line to get the balance back. And who pays for all that? You? I pay for it. It means new routines, new choreography, new identities, new costumes."

"I'm sorry," I said.

Bogolub wasn't listening. He wasn't even mad any more. He was just thinking out loud. "Maybe I could mask somebody. Maybe some old tanker could come in masked. A new personality. That might fix things."

"I could go against Fat Smith if I wore a mask," I said. "Bush could fight my man."

Bogolub was silent.

"That would restore the balance," I said.

"Who you supposed to be fighting?" he asked finally. "The Grim Reaper, ain't it?"

"Yes."

"We'll see. I won't make promises."

"I'm really sorry about tonight," I said. "I was sick."

Look, Alconi had just died. He left no heirs, no survivors (there *are* no survivors), and my contract had reverted back to myself. It was like having my salary suddenly doubled, and with Bogolub sore at me I stood to lose something for the first time in my life. *That's* why I apologized.

He looked at me. He didn't believe my excuse, but he was grateful that I had made one. "You'd have to change your style," he said.

"Yes," I said. "I'd *have* to change my style."

When I saw him the next day Bogolub explained that if I assumed a new identity I could no longer wrestle on the West Coast as myself.

"That's all right," I said.

He looked at me narrowly.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing," he said. "Some guys mind."

He wanted me to stay over in Los Angeles a few more days to talk over plans and line up matches (most of them with men I was already scheduled to meet) and sign new contracts. I had to cancel contests in Sacramento and Berkeley, but Bogolub was so excited about launching a new career for someone that he agreed to split the forfeit fee with me.

I saw him two days later and he asked me if I had any ideas.

"About what?"

"About *what*? About the costume!"

I tried to seem enthusiastic. I would paint my body green, I told Bogolub, and wear a monster mask. There would be fangs and saliva could drip down from them like stuff coming off stalactites. I would call myself The Wolf Man and explain my complexion by the fact that I was raised in a cave in Belgium until I was eighteen.

Bogolub listened to me thoughtfully, then frowned. "It's no good," he said. "It's too corny."

"Gee, I liked it," I told him.

"Nah," Bogoblub said, "what'd happen when you sweat?"

"When I sweat?"

"Sure," Bogolub said, "the green paint. It's no good."

"How about an executioner's mask? I could wear an executioner's mask down to my shoulders. With big holes for the eyes and the nostrils."

"You ain't got the body for it," he said professionally. "You got a young body. That's what we got to start with."

"Yes," I said. "I suppose that's right."

"Sure," he said. "We got to work on that angle of it. We can't make you into something horrible when you ain't."

"You can't make a sow's ear out of a silk purse," said.

Bogolub didn't answer. He seemed lost in thought. After a while he smiled and patted his stomach affectionately.

"Have you got an idea?"

"I *think* so, I *think* so. How would this be? We put you in a white silk mask. Like the Lone Ranger's, only white. And you wear white trunks and a beautiful white silk cape. And white shoes. Nothing else. Very simple. You're The Masked Playboy. You wear the mask because you're really a millionaire's kid and you don't want your parents to know that you're wrestling professional—it would break their hearts. THE HIGH-SOCIETY WRESTLER! WHO IS HE? How's that?"

"Mr. Bogolub," I said, "you're a genius."

I became The Masked Playboy. This was in the early days of the baroque wrestler, and Bogolub's maneuver was very successful. Now it was arranged for me to wrestle fairly regularly. Bogolub explained the motivation. Why, after all, would a millionaire playboy like myself continue to wrestle if he lost? He would *have* to be a pretty good wrestler. Bogolub was pleased with his invention and began to have more and more dates on the West Coast. Once Bogolub told me that my masquerade was actually helping free enterprise and capitalism. There was far too much baloney going around about the working classes. Bogolub said. If Americans were made to see how tough and clean-cut a rich man's son could be, they would snap up and take notice and it would be good for business.

Bogolub was like the rest of us, I thought sadly. It was like those scenes in Technicolor musicals when Joe Iturbi interrupts the classical piece he's playing and goes into a boogie-woogie riff. It's our instinct to applaud such acts, to wink at Carmen Miranda with Esther Williams when the time comes. It's our signal. The secret handshake of the eye. Classical is only fancy, but popular is good. Little is big and weak is strong and poor is rich. What I stood for, what I demonstrated behind my silk mask, like the Lone Ranger's, only white, was even better. That rich is poor, that alive will one day be dead.

I now had four distinct personalities, anyway identical

ties: The Southern Boswell, cheerful, victorious bearer of the white man's burden—whipper of Wops, Spik scourger, Hebe hitter, Polack pitcher. The Midatlantic, Midwest, Midnorthern Tier Boswell, a loser, the Anglo-Saxon toy of first-generation Europeans. Number three—West Coast. The Masked Playboy. Rich Man's Son (a kind of Christ, really). The Man in the White Silk Mask. Who didn't need the money but beat up guys to show he was regular. (Who couldn't use the death, since he was immortal, but who died anyway to show he was regular.) And last, everywhere, myself. The Boswell Boswell. Don't ask. Don't ask.

Without a map it was sometimes difficult to know who I was, good guy or bad. Only the offstage Boswell, the Boswell in the Street, got any peace, and it a fitful one.

For five months I toured, climbing the country in busy, sooty eastern and central tours, a wrestler in industrial towns, comic relief for the day shift. Making the more leisurely long, low southern lope, the white hope of God knows what. Then the western trip. Quick. Off with the horn-rimmed glasses. Into the cape. The mask. The white shoes. The Capitalist's Friend. Free Enterprise's Prize. And all in the preliminaries. Alarums and excursions without. In the anteroom of history as it were. The man who fights the man who fights the man who fights the man who one day saves or kills the king.

Then one evening, six months after putting on the silk mask in Los Angeles, I was having dinner with a promoter in Columbus, Ohio.

"I was out with Barry Bogolub a couple of weeks ago. He came East on a scouting tour. You work for him, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Yeah, he was telling me. Seems you got this gimmick going for you in L.A. Mystery Playboy or something."

"The Masked Playboy."

"Yeah, that's right, he was telling me."

"What about it?"

"It sounds good. Next time you're in Columbus, bring your mask."

So, gradually, slowly, the real Boswell began to fade. Boswell was dead. Long live Boswell. More and more I

wrestled as The Masked Playboy. In hick towns there were write-ups in the paper. I can remember sitting in more than one lousy hotel room, drinking expensive Scotch, a silken ascot under my ratty robe, legs crossed, staring democratically from behind my mask at the reporter who had come to interview me.

"Yes, thass right. Educated at Cambridge. But I told Father at the time that I shouldn't be content with a sedentary rich man's life. He thought it a youth's threat, of course, and meanwhile I developed my body to what you see now."

"Were you actually in the Four Hundred?"

"Well, not actually. There was some nasty business some years ago about an uncle in trade. If I had to place the family myself, I'd put it somewhere in the low Five Hundreds."

"I see," the poor fellow would say wearily. "You're not supporting the family now, of course, it hasn't——"

"Fallen on harder days? I should think not. Otherwise I might be able to take off this damnable mask. No, no, the Van Bl——, I mean, *the family*, is moneyed."

"They've got a lot of money," he'd say, writing it down.

"Oh, Lord yes, I should say so. But a fellow likes to earn a bit of his own, you know."

"Yeah," the man would say.

Yeah. So I died and died and another part of me was born and born. After a while articles began to appear about me in the wrestling magazines. The more sophisticated ones, *The Ring*, for example, treated me with contempt. My sort of "showmanship" would proliferate, they editorialized, and with the help of unscrupulous promoters I would help to discredit even further a once noble sport. The other magazines, the body-building books and that sort, took the story, or pretended to take it, at face value, passing it on to their readers—who *were* those people anyway?—so that it actually gained in translation. I wrestled, they said, only in those towns where had factories or brokerage offices or banks.

I was bigger now, more important than I had ever been as myself, and the lesson was not lost on me. For the first time I began to take the wrestling seriously. As th

months went by I gathered more and more of a reputation. There was talk that one day I would be a serious contender for the championship.

Which brings me to my first appearance in a main event.

Bogolub had told me the night he wanted to throw me out of wrestling that I might one day be a contender, that he had had his eye on me. Perhaps it was true. I doubt it, but perhaps it was. Probably he said it to add a fillip to my loss, to start in the young man's mind the old man's myth, "I could have been the champion . . ." We are instinctively ironists, tricky tragedians. But if it was not true when Bogolub said it, a year later it was.

One night I got a call from Bogolub when I was in Fargo, North Dakota.

"Playboy? Barry."

"Yes, Mr. Bogolub?"

"Pete Lancer broke his leg in Philly last night. He was supposed to go against The Grim Reaper in a main event in St. Louis Friday, but there's no question of his making it. I want you to go down and take his place."

"I can't do it," I said. "I'm fighting in Des Moines Friday."

"Called off, kid."

"What about the forfeit fee?"

"Playboy, you're talking regarding peanuts. This is a main event in St. Louis I'm talking about. You're big-time now, Masked. Give me a call when you get to L.A." He started to hang up.

"Mr. Bogolub. Mr. Bogolub?"

"Come on, Boswell, this is long-distance. Fargo ain't Fresno."

"What about the arrangements?"

"Oh, yeah, in my excitement I forgot to tell you. You lose."

"What's that?"

"You lose. Give them a show, you understand, you're an important wrestler, but you lose. I can trust you."

"Mr. Bogolub, the last time I was scheduled to meet him I was supposed to win."

"He's the next champion, Playboy. Be a little patient, please. Give me a ring as soon as you get to L.A."

"Mr. Bogolub, I don't want to fight him. I don't want to fight him Friday." I was talking to myself. Bogolub had hung up.

I went down to the National Guard Armory. I don't even remember who I wrestled. I stumbled through the routine and it was a lousy show, I remember, even though I won. The crowd was booing me. "Hey, masked man, go get Tonto," someone shouted. "Hey Kemosabe, you stink." "Take off the mask, Prince. The ball is over."

In the locker room afterward, the fellow I beat sat down next to me.

"What's wrong, Boswell?" (The wrestlers, of course, knew who I was. In a way the wrestlers were wonderful. They always played to the other fellow's costume.) "Don't you feel good?"

"Ah, Bogolub called before the match. I fight The Reaper Friday in St. Louis."

"That's terrific," he said. "That's really great. Main eventer?"

"Yes."

"That's marvelous, Boswell. That's really terrific."

"I lose."

"Oh," he said. "Oh, that's different. That's too bad. That's a tough piece of luck."

I didn't understand his reaction, but in the plane that night I suddenly understood. He thought I felt bad because I was supposed to lose. I was a comer, a contender. One day I was supposed to be strictly a main eventer. The Reaper already was. If I was scheduled to lose to him in my first appearance in a main event it probably meant that Bogolub was narrowing the field, was dumping me. I was better off winning the little matches, better off even losing some of them, than losing the big ones. It was too soon for me to go against Reaper and lose. When I realized this, I realized something else. I hadn't been thinking of my career at all. This was personal. I had been thinking of John Sallow.

John Sallow, the Grim Reaper, was the wrestler I had been scheduled to fight in L.A. just before I disappeared out there as Boswell. Sallow had been fighting under one name or other for years. He had been a wrestler before I was even born. He had wrestled when the sport was a

sport, before it had become an "exhibition." At one time in their careers he had beaten Strangler Lewis, had beaten The Angel, had beaten all the champions. He had fought everywhere—Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, the Americas, everywhere. It was now impossible to know how many fights he had actually had because many were in days and towns when and where they didn't keep records, and because, too, of his many changes of name. He wasn't very active in the 'Thirties, though he fought some during the depression, but he came out of his semi-retirement during the Second World War when many of the younger wrestlers were in the service. One day he was to beat them, too, just as he had defeated the older champions.

It was phenomenal to see the old man work. The crowds loved to watch him; they loved to gape, fascinated, at his wily, ancient movements. He was curiously lithe and gave an impression of incredible detachment, suggesting that the body which moved so gracefully was somehow something he merely inhabited, oddly like clothes which move always a split second after the agent inside them had already moved. He seemed to exercise an almost ruthless discipline of his limbs. His face carried this impression even further. It was impassive, totally without expression, without the familiar landmarks of love or hate. Nor did he fit conveniently into the traditional comic role of hero or villain in his matches. True, he never employed the obvious techniques, the blatant eye gougings, hair pullings, finger bendings, chokeholds, which sooner or later could bring even the most sophisticated crowd to its feet, to make it scream in educed outrage, but there was latent in his movements, always slow, always oddly prim, sure viciousness, an indifference to consequences to bone and muscle. If he pulled a punch it was ultimately strategic, and although he submitted to the terms of his contracts, winning or losing according to some higher plan, wrestlers hated to fight him. He hurt them even when he lost. They could not account for his steady strength. Some said he was insane, but if he was his irrationality never extended to his activities in the ring. Indeed, he seemed to have a *rational body*! His movements were so naturally deft and logical that it is

impossible to imagine his ever stubbing his toe or ripping his clothes on a nail. Outside the ring, in street clothes, he was unremarkable, a tall, pale, almost gaunt man, with preternaturally black hair. He looked like a farmer, in town to visit by a bedside in a hospital, perhaps. He did not speak much (indeed, you could tell that by looking at him) but he must have had an extraordinary facility with languages. Once, when I was on a card with him, I heard him explain to two Japanese Sumo wrestlers who had come over for a special exhibition what arrangements had been made for them. The Sumos, delighted that they had found someone who could speak their language, tried to engage him in further conversation, but Sallow simply turned away.

It was with relief the year before that I discovered I would not have to fight him. I could abide the clowns, good guys and bad guys alike, but to have to struggle with Sallow's naked dignity, to have to believe that somehow the match really was of consequence, was something I could not look forward to. I would have fought him if I had had to (actually I had been scheduled to win), but not to have to was much simpler for me.

In the year I had been making my reputation, Sallow had been remaking his. I heard talk of him wherever I went. Wrestlers spoke in awe of his phenomenal strength, of his ability simply to rise under the weight and pressure of any hold. He was now wrestling constantly, wrestling everywhere, winning everywhere. It was said that suddenly he had simply refused to throw any more matches. He had never been the champion, the wrestlers reasoned. Perhaps now, before his career had ended (surely it was almost over; how old *was* he? Fifty? Sixty? *More?*), he was eager at last to have the belt. At any rate, he had been winning steadily.

Knowing Bogolub (who was his manager as well as my own now), I could not believe that Sallow would do anything which did not meet with Bogolub's approval, so I doubted the story that he won fights he had been meant to lose. Still, there was something odd in the persistence of the rumors, something odder in his quick, bright fame, the queer fascination of the crowds that came to watch him. They didn't like him. They never cheered his victo-

ries. I had been in stadiums when he fought and there was no more noise than there would have been had the crowd never gathered, had it stayed in its individual homes, watching its individual television sets in its individual silences. They came, one gathered, to watch age beat youth, not to *see* it, to watch it, to be there when it happened if it had to happen, witnesses at some awful accident, not personal, not human, a disturbance in nature itself, some lush imbalance of nature. Even old people in the crowds watched with distaste his effortless lifts of men twice his size and half his age. He was not their hope as in the South I had been. They wanted nothing to do with his victories. They refused to be cozened with immortality. Yet—this was the oddest circumstance—as they never cheered Sallow, neither did they cheer his opponents. Again, they simply watched, as one watched any inevitable struggle—a fox against a chicken, say—fascinated and a little afraid.

The papers never let the public forget The Grim Reaper theme, equating John Sallow with death itself. "Last night, before a crowd of 7,000 persons in Tulsa's Civic Auditorium, John Sallow, the Grimmest Reaper, danced a *danse macabre* with a younger, presumably stronger man. With slow inevitability the dark visitor"—this was the journalist's imagination; Sallow is pale—"choked all resistance from the helpless body of his opponent." They pretended fear and made John Sallow rich. In February, 1949, however, someone actually died while fighting John Sallow. He was fighting Seldon Faye, the Olympic champion. In the very beginning Sallow lifted Faye off the ground, slammed him down and pinned him. He was declared the winner and he left the ring. Faye did not get up. If Sallow heard the mob he gave no indication, and he went down into his dressing room, showered, dressed and was out of the town before a doctor declared Faye officially dead. It turned out that Faye had a bad heart. He shouldn't have been wrestling at all, but after this The Grim Reaper ceased to be merely a catch phrase and took on the significance of an official title. Some zealous reporter dug up the information that a wrestler named Jack Shallow had killed another wrestler in Johan-

nesburg, South Africa, in 1920. Were Sallow and Shallow the same person? In the myth, of course, they were.

I saw him, I knew, as the crowd saw him, as the papers pretended to see him.

I saw him as the Angel of Death.

Now I had to fight him. Bogolub wanted me to lose but I couldn't. Fixing beyond fixing. It would be the first honest match . . . fight . . . struggle . . . of my career. I was back to the barroom days, one against four, the old odds, the odds that make causes, that make heroes and victims out of winners and losers. That was all right. Come on Sallow, old enemy, Boswell the Big goes against the Angel of Death to save the world. That the public would think me The Masked Playboy was fitting too. It's real heroes are never known to it. Masks beyond masks. No matter. I would save it anyway, anonymously, nominally. In St. Louis I would break old death's old back.

Maybe others think it strange that an overgrown man like myself can believe such things. I say only this is my defense. Why not? Who knows what I believe? If God why *not* the Angel of Death? Why not ghosts and dragons? Anyway this is the *Angel of Death* I'm talking about. Ah, you don't believe in him? You think you're the one that's going to live forever? Forget it. Forget it. In the meantime don't snicker when somebody fights your battles for you.

I was in St. Louis two days before the match and went to my hotel. My hotel. Hah! When I was close enough to read the medallion on the building with approval: HOTEL MISSOURI—TRANSIENTS. You said it, I thought. That's telling them, inn-keeper. There should be signs like that all over: in banks, on movie seats, on beds in brothels, in churches. That would change the world. Even on coffin lids. Transients! Put it to them straight. No loitering! No a command. A warning. Official, brass-plated Dutch unclery.

I registered. The desk clerk looked familiar to me. (I never forget a face, but it constantly astonishes me when I recognize people in public places—to see the same waiter in a restaurant when I return to a city after five months, the same stewardess on two flights, the same woman who sells tickets in a movie, the same clerk at

desk. That astonishes me. But I know these are the exceptions. The turnover in the world is terrific. Usually the waiter no longer waits for anything. The stewardess is grounded. The woman in the cashier's box files no nails. Neither do they grow. The clerk has checked out.) I took the key from him and went up to my room. By some coincidence my elevator had been inspected by H. R. Fox that very day. That very day. I was safe. H. R. Fox said so. In the elevator. Stay in the elevator. Its been cleared. It wasn't bad advice, but there too I was a transient. H. R. Fox was wrong. Or else I had misunderstood him. Maybe all he meant was that the elevator was safe, not the people in it. H. R. Fox knew his business. He was as sharp as a fox. He gave away nothing. Nothing.

I called room service.

"Yes sir?" a voice answered.

"This is the transient in 814." (Jerk, I thought, it adds up to 13. How come you didn't realize that?) "Send me dinner."

"What's that, sir?"

"Send me dinner."

"What would you like, sir?"

"What difference does it make?"

I hung up.

In a moment the phone rang. It was room service, a different voice than the one I had just spoken to. Already, I thought. The turnover, the turnover. "Is this the gentleman in 814 who just called about his dinner?"

"Yes," I said. "Send it up as soon as it's ready, please."

"Would the gentleman care for some chateaubriand?"

"Is that expensive?" I asked.

"Well . . ." the voice said.

"Is it?"

"It is our specialty, sir."

"Fine," I said.

"Very well then, some chateaubriand. And a wine? Should you like to see our wine list?"

"No," I said. "Send up your best wine. Two bottles."

"Certainly, sir. Is the gentleman, is the gentleman——"

"Yes?"

"Is the gentleman entertaining?"

"Only himself, buddy."

"I see, sir. Very good, sir."

"Oh, and buddy?"

"Yes sir?"

"You can't take it with you."

My dinner came and I ate it without enjoyment and drank the two bottles of wine sullenly.

I called the desk.

"This is the transient in 814. That adds up to 13, did you know that?"

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"I was in your elevator some while ago," I said, "looking at the control panel."

"Is something wrong, sir?"

"You can drop the 'sir,' buddy. We're all of us transients, you know."

"Sir?"

"Have it your way," I said. "There's no thirteenth floor."

"Sir?"

"There's no thirteenth floor. There's a twelfth floor and a fourteenth floor, but there's no thirteenth floor."

"Sir," the clerk said, humoring the drunken transient from out of town, "that's standard hotel policy. Many of our guests are superstitious and feel——"

"I know all about it," I interrupted him, "but that's the most important floor of all."

The clerk smiled over the telephone.

"Get it back, do you understand?"

"I'll see about it, sir."

"Thank you," I said politely. "I thought you should know." I hung up. I remembered something I had forgotten. I called the desk clerk again.

"Transient in 814," I said.

"Yes sir," the clerk said. He was getting a little tired of me. Fun was fun, he was thinking, but there was a convention in town.

"Has John Sallow checked into this hotel?"

The clerk brightened over the phone.

"Just one moment, sir, I'll check that for you."

The line went dead.

"I'm sorry, sir," the clerk said in a moment, "no such party is registered at the Missouri."

"Standard hotel policy, I suppose, like the foolishness about the thirteenth floor. Superstitious guests I suppose."

"Shall I check my reservations, sir?" he asked coldly.

"No," I said. "If he shows up, have him get in touch with the transient in 814."

I hung up.

I found a Yellow Pages in the nightstand by the telephone. I opened it to Hotels and called them all alphabetically and asked if John Sallow were there. He was nowhere. Sure, I thought, what do you think, the Angel of Death needs a room? How would he sign the register? How would he have the nerve to walk into one of H. R. Fox's elevators? Besides, he's no transient.

I went to bed.

I was in the gym at eleven o'clock the next morning. I went up to Lee Lee Meadows, the promoter. Lee Lee was wrapped in a big orange camel's-hair coat. He was talking to a reporter. "Lee Lee, is it true you can go fourteen days without water?" the reporter was asking.

"Lee Lee," I said, going up beside him, "I've got to speak to you."

"I'm talking to the press here," Lee Lee said.

The reporter caught the eye of a wrestler and walked over toward him. Lee Lee raised his hand to object. The reporter smiled and waved back at him. Lee Lee turned to me. "Yeah, well, what's so important?"

"Is Sallow in town yet? I tried all the hotels."

Lee Lee frowned. "He'll be when he'll be," he said.

"I've got to see him before the match."

Lee Lee looked at me suspiciously. "Hey you," he said, "what's the excitement?"

"I just have to see him," I said.

"Yeah? Bogolub called me about you. He said you ain't too anxious to fight the Reaper. That you don't want to lose."

"No," I said, "I want to fight him."

"Because I got five tankers wild to be whipped by the Reaper."

"No, no, Bogolub misunderstood. I *want* to fight him."

"The Reaper pulls here. You're nothing."

"Of course," I said. "I want to see him because thought of a new routine."

"He'll be when he'll be."

"He's not in town?"

"How do I know where he is? He could be with floozy on Market Street. What do I know if he's in town? That old man. That's some old man."

"Lee Lee?"

"What?"

"This business about The Grim Reaper, what do you think about it?"

"A terrific idea. Brilliant."

"Then you don't believe any of it?"

"Come on," Lee Lee said.

"It's just a stunt," I said, "like The Masked Playboy?"

"Well, that I don't know. I'll say this. I been promoting matches in Louis since 1934. Reaper was one of my first fighters."

"That's only 17 years," I said.

"Kid," he said. "Kid, he was an old man *then!*"

I worked out listlessly with some of the other wrestler on Friday's card and at two o'clock I went back to my hotel.

I called all the hotels again. It took me an hour and half. I left messages with all the clerks. Then I slept. I dreamed fitfully of John Sallow and awoke at ten with headache. I wondered if I had been awakened by the telephone. I had to talk to him. The Masked Playboy unmasked. It was all true about me. As true as it may have been about Sallow. These things were no accidents. Gorgeous George is gorgeous. We were like movie stars playing ourselves. Behind the mask *was* a rich man's son at least spiritually—a bored darling of no means, of no means at all. I had forgotten about death. Sallow reminded me. My morbidness had led me back to myself. Transients within transients. OK, I thought, here is where I live. Now just let him call.

I didn't leave my room for fear I would miss the Reaper's call. It did not come. I fell asleep fully clothed upon my made bed.

I dreamed bad dreams and finally struggled out of my

sleep like a person trying to move one particular finger on a hand that has gone numb.

In the morning I changed my clothes slowly, ceremonially, changing from one pair of seven-ninety-five slacks into another pair of seven-ninety-five slacks, like a matador into his suit of lights.

I called the desk.

"Are there any messages for me?"

"Who is this, sir?"

"Boswell. 814."

"We should have called you if there were, sir."

"Of course," I said, "thank you."

I could not eat breakfast. I went to the gymnasium.

"Is Sallow in the city yet?" I asked Lee Lee Meadows.

"As a matter of fact, yeah," he said.

"Did you tell him I wanted to see him?"

"He said he'd see you tonight."

"Where is he staying?"

"Ah, come on, Boswell. I don't know. How should I know where the old man stays?"

"You knew I was looking for him," I said.

"Tonight he'll be in the arena. Conduct your business there."

When I went back to the hotel it had begun to rain. From my room I called the hotels again. He wasn't registered.

"That's impossible," I yelled at the desk clerk when I came to the last hotel on my list.

It was six o'clock and I had not eaten. I had better eat, I told myself. I went downstairs.

I had two steaks for strength. I chewed the meat slowly, the juices and fats filming my lips thickly. I broke the bones and gnawed at the marrow inside. The waiter watched me, his disgust insufficiently masked by a thin indifference.

When I had finished my meat he came to stand beside my plate. "Will there be anything else, sir?" he asked.

"Bring me bread," I told him.

"Bring me red tomatoes," I said when I had chewed and swallowed the bread.

"Bring me ice cream in a soup bowl," I said when I had sucked the tomatoes.

I went upstairs and lay down to wait while the food was being digested. At eight o'clock I took my white silk cape, my mask, my tights, my shoes. I wrapped them in newspaper and went downstairs.

The doorman could not get me a cab in the rain. He held an umbrella over me and walked beside me to the corner where I waited for a streetcar.

"I'm going to the arena," I told the conductor.

He saw the silk cape through a rent in the newspaper and nodded indifferently. I sat on the wide, matted straw seat along the side of the car, my shoes damp, their thin soles in shallow, steamy, dirty puddles on the floor. Useless pink streetcar transfers, their cryptic holes curiously clotted with syrupy muck, floated face downward like suicides. Colored round bits from the conductor's punch made a dirty, cheerless confetti on the floor of the car. I read the car ads, depressed by the products of the poor, their salves for pimples, their chewing gum, their sad, lack-luster wedding rings. A pale, fleshless nurse, a thick red cross exactly the color of dried blood on her cap, held up a finger in warning. V.D. CAN KILL! spoke the balloon above her. To the side a legend told of cures, of four licensed doctors constantly in attendance, of convenient evening hours that enabled people not to lose their day's pay, of treatments handled in the strictest confidence. There was a phone number and an address, the numerals and letters as thick and black as a scare headline. Above the address, floating on it like a ship tossing on heavy seas, was a drawing of a low gray building which looked like nothing so much as a factory where thin, underpaid girls turned out cheap plastic toys. Across the façade was the name: The St. Louis Institute for the Research and Treatment of Social Diseases and General Skin Disorders. Licensed 1928. The advertisement though I had never seen it, seemed wearily familiar. Soon it was as if I had never not seen it. It was infinitely boring, depressing. I closed my eyes and saw it on my lids.

Everyone looked shabby, fatigued, their heavy florid faces empty of everything save a kind of dull ache. Those who were not returning from menial jobs were going to them, to wash down office buildings, tend lonely ware

houses, stand outside lavatories in theaters and night-clubs. Almost everyone carried some worthless thing in some unimportant package—brown paper bags which once contained cheap fruit and now held rolled-up stockings, extra rags, soiled aprons, torn trousers, stale sandwiches and waxy pints of warm milk for two-thirty in the morning.

Only four teen-aged boys standing at the back of the car looked as though they could still be interested in their lives and these looked, despite their youth, disreputable as the others, romanceless in their shiny jackets, their billed motorcycle caps.

Outside, the rain clung listlessly to the barred windows of the streetcar.

The ride was interminable. No one ever seemed to get off. The car would stop and more would climb on, crowding steamily, smelling of wet wool and poverty and dirt, into the overheated, feverish brightness of the car. They swayed dreamily against the poles they held for balance and left greasy smudges on the chipped milkish porcelain.

A colored woman as big as myself sat down heavily next to me with the rough displacement of fatigue. Her knees, spread wide, bounced comfortably against my thighs. Her skirt was so high on her lap that I could see the rolled tops of her stockings, oddly light and obscenely pinkish against the dark insides of her legs.

I had been glancing repeatedly at the conductor, as much to identify myself as a stranger and thus isolate myself from my fellow passengers as to proclaim my unfamiliarity with the route. He stared back without recognition. "The arena," I mouthed across the colored woman's breasts. He flicked his eyes away impatiently. I closed my eyes and saw again The St. Louis Institute for the Research and Treatment of Social Diseases and General Skin Disorders. In the dark the streetcar slogged forward with a ponderous inevitability.

I thought of the fight. Had I eaten enough? What was the old man's strategy? Did I have any strategy? Was he really the Angel of Death? Would I be able to talk to him beforehand?

An arm shook me.

"You dropped your mask," someone said sullenly.

"What's that?"

"Here's your mask you dropped," the colored woman said. It seemed ridiculously white and silken in her big brown hand, like some intimate undergarment.

"Thank you," I said, embarrassed.

I glanced down at my lap. The clumsy bundle had come loose. One end of the silk cape dragged in a puddle. An old man across the aisle leaned far forward in his seat. I thought he would fall. He retrieved the cape for me. "Thank you," I said and looked nervously toward the conductor.

He held up two fingers to indicate that it would be two more stops. I stood up. "Have a nice party," the old man said huskily. When the car stopped I got off though I knew I had moved prematurely. "Hey," the conductor called as I stepped down. I pretended not to hear him and walked to the arena in the rain.

The trunks were damp when I put them on. Above me I could hear the thin crowd (the rain had held it down) shouting at the referee. It was an unmistakeable sound. They thought they saw some infraction he had missed. A strange sound of massed outrage, insular and safe; self-conscious in its anonymity and lack of consequence. If commitment always cost so little, which of us would not be a saint?

I dressed quickly, squeezing uncomfortably and awkwardly into the damp trunks. I laced the high-top silk shoes, fitted the mask securely over my head, and buckled the clasp of the heavy silk cape about my throat. I looked around. Down a row of lockers a couple of college wrestlers who had already fought were rubbing themselves generously with liniment. I went over to them.

"Excuse me, did you see John Sallow?" I asked.

They looked at me and then at each other.

"It's a masked man," one of them said. "Ask him what he wants, Tom."

Tom pretended to hitch up his chaps. "What do you want, masked man?"

"Do you know John Sallow? He's supposed to be on the card tonight. Have you seen him?"

"He went thataway, masked man," the other said.

I walked away from them and went into the toilet. On

of the college boys came in. "Hey, Tom," he called, "there's a masked man in here."

"Knock it off," I said.

"It's all so corny," the kid said.

"Knock it off," I said again.

"OK, champ," he said.

"Knock it off."

I left the toilet and went back to my locker. John Sallow was there, one gray leg up on the wooden bench.

"Bogolub tells me you may try to give me some trouble tonight," he said.

"This is my last match," I said. "I'm quitting after tonight." It was true. I hadn't known it was true until I said it. Too often it rained. Too often I had to take the streetcar. Too often I sat too close to the steamy poor. I could still see the nurse. I never forget a face.

There were excited screams and a prolonged burst of applause above us. Sallow looked up significantly. "Upstairs," he said. "You'll be introduced first. I'm the favorite."

"Look," I said. "I wanted to talk to you."

"Upstairs," he said. "Talk upstairs."

I took my place behind two blue-uniformed ushers at Gate DD. Some boys, just to the right of the entrance, kept turning around to look at me. They laughed and pointed and whispered to each other.

The ring announcer in a tuxedo was climbing through the ropes far in front of me. He walked importantly to the center of the ring, stopping every few steps to turn and pull a microphone wire in snappy, snaking arcs along the surface of the canvas. He tapped the microphone with his fingernail and sent a piercing metal thunk throughout the arena. Then, shooting his cuffs and clearing his throat, he paused expectantly. The crowd watched with mild interest. "First I have some announcements," he said. He told them of future matches, reading the names of the wrestlers from a card concealed in his palm. He spoke each wrestler's name with a calm aplomb and familiarity so that their grotesque titles sounded almost like real names. He paused. Jerking more microphone cord into the ring as though he needed all he could get for what he would say next, he began again. "Ladies and

gentlemen . . . in the main event this evening . . . two tough . . . wrestlers, both important contenders for the heavyweight championship of the world. The first . . . that rich man's disguised son . . . who has danced with debutantes and trains on champagne . . . the muscle millionaire and eligible bachelor . . . who'd rather rough and tumble than ride to the hounds . . . from Nob Hill and Back Bay . . . from Wall Street and the French Riviera . . . from Newport and the fabled courts of the eastern potentates . . . weighing 235 pounds without the cape but in the mask . . . the one . . . the only . . . *Masked Playboy!*"

I pushed the ushers out of the way and bounded down the long aisle toward the ring. To everyone but the kid who had spotted me earlier it must have looked as though I had run up the turnpikes from Wall Street, over the bridge across the Mississippi and through the town to the arena. Modest but good-enough-willed applause paralleled my course down the aisle as though I were somehow tripping it off automatically as I came abreast of each row. I leaped up the three steps leading to the ring and hurdled over the ropes. I unclasped the cape and, arching my shoulders, let it fall behind me in a heap. Then swelling my chest and stretching my long body, I stood on the tips of my high-top silk shoes, seemingly hatched from the cape itself, a crumpled silken eggshell. The crowd cheered. I nodded, lifted the cape with the point of one shoe, slapped it sharply across one arm and tossed it casually to an attendant beneath me. Then I grabbed the thick ropes where they angled at the ring post. Without moving my legs I pushed, head down, against the rope. Snapping my head up quickly, I pulled against them. I could feel the muscles climbing on my back. I looked like a man rowing in place. I let go of the ropes, dropped my weight solidly on my feet and did deep knee bends. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the ring announcer waiting a little impatiently for me to finish while the crowd applauded cheerfully. Suddenly I stood up, made precise military right face and sprang up onto the rope catching the upper rope neatly along my left thigh. I hooked my right foot under the lower rope for balance and folded my arms calmly. I looked like someone on

trapeze. Or, perhaps, like a young, masked sales executive perched casually along the edge of his desk.

Smiling at the ring announcer, I waved my arm grandly, indicating he should go on. He turned away from me. He waited until the crowd was silent. When he began again he sounded oddly sad. "Meeting him in mortal . . . physical . . . one-fall . . . forty-five-minute-time limit combat tonight . . . is that grim gladiator . . . ancient athlete . . . stalking spectral superman . . . fierce-faced fighter . . . that plague maker . . . that hoary horror . . . that breath-breaking . . . hope-choking . . . death-dealing . . . mortality-making . . . heart-hemorrhaging . . . life-letting——" For the last few seconds the crowd had been applauding in time with the announcer's rhythms. In a way their applause incited him. They incited each other. Now he paused, exhausted. There were a few last false claps and then silence.

"Widow-making," someone yelled from the crowd, applauding four times.

"Coffin-counting," someone else shouted.

"People-pounding," the announcer added weakly.

I slid off the rope. "MUR . . . DER . . . ING," I shouted from the center of the ring. "*All death is murder.*"

The ring announcer motioned me angrily to get back. By exercising his authority, the authority of his tuxedo, he seemed to have regained control. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began again more calmly, "in gray trunks, from the Lowlands, John Sallow, The Grim Reaper."

With the rest of the crowd I glanced quickly toward the entrance opposite the one I had used, but from my vantage point I could see that there was no one there. I watched the gate nervously, expecting Sallow to materialize. No one came. Through the entrance gate I could see the long, low concession stand and someone calmly spooning mustard onto a hot dog. Then I heard a gasp from the other end of the arena. Sallow had been spotted. I looked around just in time to see him coming in through the same gate I had used. Of course, I thought. Of course.

He walked slowly. As he came down the aisle toward the ring a few people, more than I would have thought,

began to applaud. "He has his fans," I said softly to the referee, who had just come into the ring. Most people, however, particularly those near the aisle, seemed to shrink back as he passed them. Recognizing someone, he suddenly stopped, put his hand on the person's shoulder and leaned down toward him, whispering something into his ear. When Sallow started again, the man he had spoken to stood and left the auditorium.

Sallow came up the three stairs, turned and bowed mockingly to the crowd. They looked at him. He smiled and shrugged and climbed through the ropes. He walked to his corner. I tried to catch his eye but he wouldn't look at me.

"The referee will acquaint the wrestlers with the Missouri rules," the ring announcer said. He stepped back modestly and handed the microphone to the referee. The referee signaled for us to meet at the center of the ring.

"This is a one-fall match, forty-five-minute time limit," he said. "When I signal one of you to break, I want you to break clean and break quickly. Both you men have fought in Missouri before. You're both familiar with the rules in this state. I just want to remind you that if for any reason a man should be out of the ring and not return by the time I count twenty, that man forfeits the fight. Do both of you understand?"

Sallow nodded placidly. The referee looked at me. I nodded.

"All right. Are there any questions? Reaper? . . . Playboy? O.K. Good. Return to your corners. When the bell rings, come out to wrestle."

I had just gotten back to my corner when the bell rang. I whirled around, expecting to find Sallow behind me. He was across the ring. I moved toward him aggressively and locked my arms around his neck. Already my body was wet. Sallow was completely dry.

"Don't you ever sweat?" I whispered.

He twisted out of my neck lock and pushed me away from him.

I went toward him like a sleepwalker, inviting him to lock fingers in a test of strength. He ignored me and ducked quickly under my outstretched arms. He grabbed me around the waist and raised me easily off the floor. I

was humiliating. I felt like some wooden religious idol carried in a procession. I beat at his neck and shoulders with the flats of my hands. Sallow increased the pressure of his arms around my body. Desperately I closed one hand into a fist and chopped at his ear. He squeezed me tighter. He would crack my ribs, collapse my lungs. Suddenly he dropped me. I lay on my side writhing on the canvas. I tried to get to the ropes, moving across the grainy canvas in a slow side-stroke like a swimmer lost at sea. The Reaper circled around toward my head and blocked my progress. I saw his smooth, marblish shins and tried to hook one arm around them. It was a trap. He came down quickly on my outstretched arm with all his weight.

"Please," I said. "Please, you'll break my arm."

The Reaper leaned down across my body and caught me around the hips. He pressed my thighs together viciously. Raising himself to one knee and then to the other, he stood up slowly. I hung upside down. He worked my head between his legs. Then, without freeing my head, he moved his hands quickly to my legs and pushed them away from his body, stretching my neck. I felt my legs go flying backward and to protect my neck tried to force them again to his body. I pedaled disgustingly in the air. He grabbed my legs again.

"Don't," I pleaded.

"If you drop me you'll kill me," I whined.

Again he forced my legs away from his body. Then suddenly he loosened his terrible grip on my head. I fell obscenely from between death's legs. Insanely I jerked my head up and broke my fall with my jaw. My body collapsed heavily behind me. It was like one of those clumsy auto wrecks in wet weather when cars pile uselessly up on each other. I had to get outside the ropes. I had a headache. I could not see clearly. I was gasping for air, actually shoveling it with my hands toward my mouth. Blindly I forced my body toward where I thought the ropes must be. Sallow kicked me. I could not get to my knees. My only way of moving was to roll. Helplessly I curled into a ball and rolled back and forth inside the ring. Sallow stood above me like some giant goalie, fainting with his feet and grotesquely seeming to guide my

rolling. The crowd laughed. Suddenly I let go of my knees and kicked powerfully toward the ropes. One foot became entangled in them. It was enough to make the referee come between us. He started counting slowly. I moved painfully under the ropes and onto the ring's outer apron. "Seven," the referee intoned. "Eight." Sallow grinned and stepped toward me. He came through the ropes after me. The referee tried to pull him back but he shrugged him off. I had gotten to my feet. "Nine," the referee said. "Ten. One for Reaper. Eleven for Playboy. Two for Reaper. Twelve for Playboy."

The Reaper advanced toward me. I circled along the apron. He pursued me.

"Missouri rules. Missouri rules," I said.

"Natural law. Natural law," he answered.

"Three for Reaper. Thirteen for Playboy."

"Not by default," I shouted. I jumped back inside the ropes.

"Four for Reaper."

"Famine, Flood, War, Pestilence," I hissed.

He came through the ropes. The referee stood between us. When Sallow was standing inside the ring the referee clapped his hands and stepped back.

I held out my hands again. I was ready to bring them down powerfully on his neck should he try to go under them. He hesitated, looking at my long fingers.

"Games?" he said. "With me?"

Slowly he put one hand behind his back. He thrust the other toward me, the fingers spread wide as a net. He was challenging me to use both my hands against his one in a test of strength. The crowd giggled.

"Both," I said, shaking my head.

He slid his arm up higher behind his back. He looked like a cripple.

I shook my head again. The crowd laughed nervously.

He bent one finger.

"No," I said. "No."

He tucked his thumb into his palm.

I stepped back angrily.

He brought down another finger.

"Use both hands," I yelled. "Beat me, don't humiliate me."

He closed a fourth finger. The crowd was silent. The finger that remained, the one finger with which he challenged my ten, was left to point at me. He took a step backward. He was not pointing. He was beckoning.

"Don't you like the odds?" someone shouted. The crowd applauded.

"You stink like pus," I yelled at the Reaper.

"Take my hand," he said quietly. "Try to force it down."

I lost control. I hurled myself toward Sallow's outstretched finger. I would tear it off, I thought. He stepped back softly, like one pressing himself politely against a wall to allow someone else to pass through a door. The crowd groaned. I looked helplessly at the Reaper. His face was calm, serene, softly satisfied, like one who had spun all the combinations on a lock and can now open it at his leisure. I braced myself too late. My body, remiss, tumbled awkwardly across the ring. The Reaper had brought his fisted hand from behind his back and smashed my unprotected ear. I fell against the rope with my mouth open. My teeth were like so many Chiclets in my mouth. I bled on the golden canvas. The Reaper stalked me. He took my head under his arm almost gently and held my bleeding ear against his chest. "I am old," he whispered, "because I am wily. Because I take absolutely nothing for granted. Not the honor of others. Not their determination. Not even their youth and strength."

He would kill me. He had no concern for my life. It was all true—the legends, the myths. Until that moment I hadn't really believed them. He had killed the man in South Africa. And how many others? In all those years how many had he maimed and murdered? He wrestled so that he could demonstrate his cruelty, show it in public, with the peculiarly desperate pride of one displaying his cancer in a medical amphitheater. He lived arrogantly, like one who you know will not give way coming toward you down a narrow sidewalk. His strength, his ancient power, was nothing supernatural. It was his indifference. That was what killed us. And it had this advantage—it could not be shorn. He could not be talked out of it. Pain was all our argument. In his arms, my face turning and turning against the bristles in his armpits, I was one with

all victims, an everyman through loss and deprivation, knowing the soul's martial law, its sad, harsh curfew. Pain was all our argument and like all pain, it was wasted. To live was all his thought, to proliferate his strength in endless war. The vampire was the truest symbol in the give and take of the universe.

I called the referee.

"Get him off."

The referee looked down at me helplessly. "It hasn't lasted long enough," he said. "You've only been at it ten minutes. You can't quit now."

"Get him off, Goddamn it!"

"These people paid for a main event. Give them a main event."

"Get him off. The main event is my death. He means to kill me."

"Take it easier with him, Reaper," the referee said. "Work him toward the ropes. Let him get away a minute."

"Sure," the Reaper said mildly.

"No," I shouted. "No. I quit."

I tried to turn my neck toward the crowd.

"He means to kill me," I yelled. "They won't let me quit." They couldn't hear me above their own roar.

The Reaper gathered me toward him. He grabbed my body—I wasn't even resisting now—and raised me over his head. He pushed me away as if I were a medicine ball, and I dropped leadenly at the base of the ring post.

I knew my man now. To treat flesh as though it were leather or lead was all his intention. To find the common denominator in all matter. It was scientific. He was a kind of alchemist, this fellow. Of course. Faust and Mephistopheles combined. Fist! I lay still.

"Fight," he demanded.

I didn't answer.

"Fight!" he said savagely.

He could win anytime, but he refused. This was a main event for him too.

"Will you fight?" he asked dangerously.

"Not with you," I said.

The crowd was booing me.

"All right," he said.

He backed away. I watched him. He was bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet in a queer rhythm. His shoulders raised and lowered rapidly, powerfully. His arms seemed actually to lengthen. He came toward me slowly in a leaning stoop, swinging his balled metallic fists inches above the canvas. It was his Reaper movement, the gesture that had given him his name. I had never seen it and I watched fascinated. The crowd had stopped booing and was now screaming for me to get up. The closer he got the more rapidly his fists swept the canvas, but still his pace toward me was slow, deliberate, almost tedious. He loomed above me like some ancient farmer with an invisible scythe. Now the people in the first rows were standing. They rushed toward the ring, pleading with me to get away. At last my resolution broke. I got clumsily to my knees and stumbled away from him. It was too late. His fists were everywhere. They caught me on the legs, the stomach, the neck, the back, the head, the mouth. I felt like some tiny animal—a field mouse—in tall grass trampled by the mower.

I covered my eyes with my hands and dropped to the canvas. I squeezed myself flat against it. I squealed helplessly. A fist caught me first on one temple, then on the other.

I heard the referee shout, "That's enough."

Then I was unconscious.

In a few seconds I came to, and my head was clear. I could have gotten up. I could have caught one of those fists and pulled him off balance. I wouldn't. I thought of that phrase they use in the wars—to struggle in vain. They were always praying that battle and injury and death were not in vain. As though anything purchased at some ultimate cost ought to be worth it. It was a well-meant prayer, even a wise one, but not practical. Life was economics. To be alive was to be a consumer. They made a profit on us always. To struggle in vain was stupid, to be on the losing side was stupid. Both were unavoidable. It was all that struggle ever amounted to in a universe like ours, in bodies like our own. I would not get up, I thought. I would not even let them know I was conscious. I lay there, calmer than I had ever been in my life.

"He's dead," someone screamed after a moment. "He's

dead," someone else shouted. They took it up, made it chant. "He's dead. He's dead. He's dead."

The police rushed into the ring. They made a circle around the Reaper and moved off with him through the crowd. They were protecting him, I knew. He was not being arrested. What he did in the ring, that was all right. He was immune to law. Law itself said he was immune. Like someone with diplomatic status. What did that reduce my death to, I wondered. What did that reduce my death to if my murder was not a murder, not some terrible aberration punishable by law? Missouri rules and natural law, they worked hand in hand in the dirty athletic of death.

Lying there on the canvas, in the idiotic nimbus of my blood, no longer sure if I were only feigning unconsciousness, or even whether I still lived, I knew that I could never struggle again, nor plead my pain. I knew, too, that the temptation was always to resist, that there was something glamorous in resistance that led us on, something glamorous in being a man, that to be one was to be a hero, but there was something off-center and sappy and insane in heroes, something clumsy. Fall guys fell. I was the grave gravity of the grave. It was better to take your dive at once, better to conspire, make deals, to keep, however cynically, the trade routes open. It was better, finally, to be a noncombatant, a serene Switzerland of man, accomplice to one's own death.

The crowd mourned me, crooning grief.

I died.

Opening Day

Jack Gilchrist
(*pseud. John Shafter*)

THE air hung heavy with the chilly dampness of a frosty spring morning. Light of another day played tag with shadows of the forest and wisps of fog resembling miniature cyclones curled up slowly from quiet spots on the face of the stream.

The man in the water crouched low as if hiding. Chest-high rubber waders protected him from the dampness. The khaki shirt he wore blended almost perfectly with the color of the waders and a wide-brimmed hat of almost the same neutral tan shielded a face that bore the pallor of indoor confinement and office employment. A willow creel hung at his left side and in his right hand he carried the slender, flexible length of a fly rod.

Progressing gently, the stranger placed each foot forward with care as he waded silently and steadily upstream in the shallow water. Slowly and ever so quietly, his eyes focused on a bend in the stream ahead, he moved in his creeping crouch, pausing occasionally for long moments as if time were endless and this day forever.

Gaining his objective, the bend in the stream, the wilderness intruder straightened behind the concealing screen of a rhododendron bush. Carefully, as if fingering the delicate web of a spider, he parted two frost laden branches of green and peered through to survey a deep wide pocket of water that escaped silently but swiftly from the churning base of a crashing waterfall. Nothing missed his scrutiny as he surveyed the pool . . . his attention eventually focusing on a large boulder that rose from the water near the head of the pool but some fifty feet to his right of the falls.

Estimating his distance from the boulder the man's experienced eye judged what needed to be done to accomplish the mission that had brought him some 150 miles during the early hours of pre-dawn darkness. His objective was a fish. Not just any fish but one single solitary fish; to him the only fish in the world. A beautiful creature of iridescent colors with a blood-red band lining each side. A trout. A rainbow trout. The largest he had ever seen and the largest he could ever hope to catch.

Thoughts of the fish filled him with impatience and a burning desire to get on with the job at hand. But thoughts of two previous meetings with the beautiful creature of the hidden pool filled him with a wariness and a caution. Twice before, during his first two years of fly-fishing apprenticeship, he had hung this wonderful fish. Twice before, in the early part of the two past seasons, before warming weather brought out novice fishermen to tramp the tender fern on the banks of the stream and muddy the quiet pools, he had met the fish in combat. And in his inexperience he twice had lost. Now for the third time and in the third season he would try again.

Crawling silently beneath trailing branches of the rhododendron bush, he waded cautiously into the shallow end of the pool barely disturbing its surface. Still crouching and pausing long moments between each step he moved so slowly that the surface of the water softly hugged his rubber clothed legs and finally his waist as the ocean of morning mist hugged the tops of the Georgia mountains towering to either side. After many long minutes he had moved less than fifteen feet from the bend in the stream and the concealing screen of rhododendron that had guarded his approach to the pool.

Eventually reaching a location he deemed suitable for his work, the fisherman paused there for a long moment and then, turning, carefully appraised the terrain to his rear to make certain his back cast would not flick a leaf or nick a twig. Satisfied he quietly committed himself to the moment. Breathing deeply he summoned all his skill, all his planning and all his patience to the meticulous task of placing the delicate fly lightly on the water in an exact spot some thirty feet away and not more than two feet past the boulder.

Lengthening several feet of leader and line through the guides of the wispy rod the fisherman stretched the bamboo before him and then raised it sharply but smoothly, sending the line backward in one long continuous flow. As it straightened, he flicked the rod forward changing the direction of the line 180 degrees while feeding excess line through the guides with his left hand to get more distance. As the line completed its first roll before him he brought his right forearm back a second time, reversing the direction of the line again, and as the added length completed an arc and tugged gently with its backward motion, he drove the rod forward for the last time, with power and yet grace in the movement.

The lengthening line shot forward. As it straightened and flew past the boulder, he lowered the rod tip slightly and then raised it deftly to settle the fly on the surface of the water with the barest whisper of disturbance.

Completely absorbed in the rhythmic ritual, the fisherman noted with satisfaction the location of the fly some few inches short of its goal but sufficiently past the lair of the trout to insure a proper float. The muscles of his arms and shoulders tensed expectantly as the bit of camouflaged steel swirled gently in a slight cross current, then began the journey that would carry it to the base of the boulder.

Although it took only a moment for the short drift it seemed to the fisherman an endless moment. His brow furrowed and crowfoot wrinkles of concentration deepened at the corners of his eyes as he projected himself thoughtfully to the drifting fly and the creature that lay watching from the depths of the pool below.

The artificial insect sailed lazily toward its destiny, then brushed the face of the boulder, and the surface of the water dimpled deeply as the trout took.

The fisherman's strike came at the same instant . . . so quickly and efficiently and yet so gently that any casual onlooker would have sworn the fisherman could see the fish and thus know the exact moment it sucked the fly into its mouth.

At the first solid tug of resistance the fisherman struck a second time but with more power and less delicacy. As the point of the hook followed by its sharp engaging barb

dug into the jaw of the trout the surface of the quiet pool shattered like a breaking mirror and with a mighty surge the great fish began its fight for life.

The trout dived for its hideaway beneath the boulder and the fisherman raised his rod to apply firm line pressure and halt the surge. Fearful of abrasion from the rock that could easily weaken the delicate leader but mindful of the power in his adversary, he fought to keep the fish away from the rock and in open water.

Responding to the pressure the fish jumped again, leaving a momentary spray-filled hole in the middle of the pool. Then as its strong sleek body crashed back into the water the trout propelled itself across the pool toward the boiling froth at the foot of the falls seeking refuge and help in the cascading force.

Once again the fisherman raised the rod and applied line pressure to turn the fish, but he had underestimated its strength and before he could turn it, the trout reached the churning water. Suddenly tautness left the line and a sickening feeling clawed at the heart of the man in the pool.

Had the great fish escaped? Had its strength, aided by the thundering water, torn the hook from its mouth? Quickly the fisherman raised the slender bamboo higher with arms reaching skyward and stepped back to get better leverage on the rod. Then again he felt the resistance, the power and the strength that would test his own, and panic subsided as thoughts once again turned to his strategy for the battle that still lay ahead.

He did not try to sting the fish into moving out from under the falls immediately. Knowing that the buffeting water was forcing the fish to exert itself against the tension of the rod, he was satisfied to keep pressure on and let the fish sap its own strength.

Gradually the great trout began to yield. Its continued pull against the strength of the line and the tension of the rod began to lessen. With pectoral fins fanning gracefully the fish floated out from under the falls slowly as if undecided what action to take next. Gradually it began to move rapidly. It exploded on the surface for a third time and then began circling the pool as if seeking a watery side door through which to escape. For better than ter

minutes the fish canvassed the pool as if caged in a strange and unknown world.

Finally, with ebbing strength and in fearful panic of approaching death, the trout made one last great effort to get away. Sweeping across the pool in a renewed surge of action it turned sharply and directly toward the fisherman, seeking access to the stream that flowed from the trail of the pool. Borne on the wings of fright it shot toward the shallow water as if to crash through the legs of its tormentor and into the neck of the stream by force. The bullet-shaped missile of color sped toward the freedom gate, and for the first time since it had taken the fly the fish was free from the pressure of the rod and line.

The sudden and increasing slackness in the line as the fish approached made it impossible for the fisherman to force line pressure control on his adversary. Once again panic gripped his mind and fear crawled through the alley of his imagination as thoughts of losing the fish spurred him to action. Abandoning caution in a desperate attempt to halt the rush of his quarry and turn it back into deeper water, he knelt and then sprawled his length across the mouth of the small stream, blocking exit from the pool.

Frightened by the disturbance in the shallow water and finding its escape path blocked the great trout turned and bore back toward its lair under the boulder. The fisherman struggled quickly to his feet and rapidly gathered slack line until he could once again feel the tautness of the connection between himself and his opponent. Wet, with waders full of water and hat floating out of sight down stream, he was oblivious to all but the soul-satisfying thought that now he had the battle nearly won.

The fisherman continued to play the fish gently, feeling its strength and power bleed slowly through the line and rod. The growing weakness of the fish served as a transfusion of strength to him, and his growing confidence lifted him on wings of exhilaration.

What a stir he would create at home. This should rank as one of the finest trout killed in the state in years. He could envision the shrine of enchantment in the eyes of his nine-year-old son at the telling of the story of the fight, and in his imaginings he could picture the creature

mounted in a curving leap, positioned on a rustic plaque and hanging on a wall at the office.

Now the job was done. The dark broad band of red lay exposed on the face of the pool as the spent creature floated on its side almost as motionless as the mist and dampness that hung suspended in the air of the close mountain valley. Firmly but with great care the victor steadily drew line in through the guides of the rod and as he did so the lifeless bulk gradually approached. He had done his job well. As he quit gathering line and raised the rod to float the fish into the shallow water at his feet, the creature came in with hardly a stir, its gills pumping gulps of oxygenated water but its broad, powerful tail virtually motionless.

Stooping quickly the fisherman inserted his thumb into the mouth of the big trout, grasping the lower jaw firmly between thumb and forefinger. Rising he lifted his arm up and forward and in almost unbelieving awe inspected his prize. Never could he have imagined capturing such a trout.

Suddenly, as if on command, a bolt of sunshine pierced the gray mist of early morning and focused itself on the drama. The red band extending full length on each side of the great fish captured the bright ray to glow like wire neon tubing, and speckled blotches of color that bordered its back and sides flickered and glimmered with the fire of diamonds, rubies, and emeralds. As if imitating the beauty of the trout, a rainbow formed in the water far beyond, and as the sun's rays fought through the fog of morning, its reflection danced on the surface of the pool.

The fisherman stood briefly as a frown of contemplation replaced the smile of victory on his face and then suddenly, as if obeying an order he could not refuse from a voice he could not deny, he knelt in the shadows and lowered the trout into the pool. With a firm but gentle grip he released the barb from its lip, and holding the creature upright, moved it to and fro in the water until its gills stroked firmly. He then released his hold, and with a weak wavering motion of its broad tail the fish moved slowly away from him until it disappeared beneath the sunlit surface of the pool.

For a long, long time the fisherman knelt there in the shallow water and the warm sunshine and gazed into the heart of the pool where the great trout had disappeared.

The Gesture

James W. Groshong

DEUTLICH forgot his apprehensions almost entirely when he saw the girl step through the hole in the side of the plane and start down the ramp in the gray mist. She held her chin very high, long black throat taut, and did not use the handrail. As she came closer he saw that she wore what appeared to be a man's suitcoat, a double-breasted gray pinstripe, above a swirling skirt of bright colors, and cracked shoes with run-over heels. When she paused at the bottom of the ramp he waved, and she came toward him in a long, loose-jointed stride that made him think of the way running animals look in slow motion.

"Eva Mary?"

"Yes." She nodded, unsmiling, and for a moment held a thin, long-fingered hand.

"I'm Homer Deutlich. Happy you are here."

"Thank you."

"Are you very tired?"

She shook her head. "Only a little bit." Her voice was soft, high-pitched and fluty, each word a distinct act of creation.

"Mrs. Deutlich—Carol—was so busy preparing for you that she decided not to come to the airport."

"I see." Still no smile.

Feeling a little outfaced, he steered her through the crowd and up the steps to the baggage counter, where he acquired two articles resembling suitboxes with rope handles, and then led her down an escalator and to the parking lot. If the girl found anything strange about the escalator she did not say so.

In the freeway traffic he thought of the violence, for

her, of the sudden change, and tried questions. Had she been able to see San Francisco through the October fog? Had she been away from Kenya before? Weren't our eucalyptus trees lovely with their ropy strips of bark? She said no to the first two and seemed not to hear the third, sitting hunched over, long satin lids over her eyes, looking, if at anything, at her own sharp knees. He started to ask about her family but realized she was asleep.

For a moment, just after turning into University Avenue, he almost regretted having begun it all by bringing home the brochure for Project Friendship, with its photographs of handsome young Africans and its three-sentence explanation that international understanding was simply a matter of getting to know the people. He had expected Carol to be amused, and a little offended, as he was, by the glibness. But she wasn't. She had sent off a letter the next morning, and within a month or two of negotiation settled on Eva Mary, with whom she proposed to garden and cook and talk and make dresses for six happy American months. He had wanted to object but was always stopped by the brightness in her face, until the brightness gradually warmed him and made him conspire, even happily, with her. But now everything was suddenly translated into the fact of this long thin sleeping girl. . . .

Carol, blonde and glowing, stood waiting on the grass. In the driveway he stopped the car and turned to shake the girl by the shoulder.

Carol brought tea and cake even before he had had time to return to the car for the girl's luggage.

"I know all Africans like tea," she was saying when he returned with the two cardboard packets, "and I hope I'm not wrong about you." This was a Carolean trick: a strong generalization followed by a hint of fallibility. She was apparently quite right, however, about Eva Mary, who seemed grateful for the tea and took the cup, awkwardly, pink showing in the cracks of her knuckles.

"Yes, I . . . like tea." She looked quickly at her hosts with dark round eyes, and then yawned.

"Just sit over here, dear, and have your tea. You must

be very tired after such a long trip." Carol guided the girl to a chair by a table at the side of the room.

The African girl's English was clear and correct but so softly spoken that Deutlich found himself leaning forward in his chair.

"Speak up, dear, we can't hear you." Carol was in her League voice. "We are very much interested in everything you have to tell us, you know, but if we can't hear you . . ."

The girl bent over her teacup, apparently studying its insides, and Deutlich could see entirely the hair which covered her head like a tight-fitting cap. Carol somewhere retrieved her knitting and now fussed with it, dropping a ball of white yarn on the floor so that it rolled part way across the floor toward Eva Mary, the slack making a twisting white road that got nowhere before rolling up in itself again. He tried bright comments on the weather in Nairobi, on Jomo Kenyatta, on Tom Mboya. Her reply was a high-pitched giggle.

When she finally put down her cup, Deutlich snatched it, and with the tray and the other two cups almost ran to the kitchen. He had just reached the sink when he heard Carol ask the girl whether she would like to go to the bathroom.

For the moment safe, he plashed about noisily, finding occupation, unnecessarily rinsing the cups, saucers, and creamer before placing them in the top rack of the dishwasher. He even emptied the sugar back in the bin and turned the bowl upside down beside the cups and creamer in the rack. Carol would fill it again in the morning and ask him about it. But now it gave him an extra moment.

The low sound of Carol's voice, then the flute sound, perhaps a laugh, from the African girl, over the flushing of the toilet.

"Homer, Eva Mary would like more tea. She didn't have room before, did you, dear?" Deutlich went to the faucet to fill the kettle.

Soon the girl was sipping noisily at fresh hot tea, long muscular lips folding over the cup's brim.

"Do you like music?"

"Yes, I like to . . . sing." Her mouth hardly moved

from the cup, the manner of her reply suggesting that she had merely overheard his question.

"I have heard some records by a South African singer—Miriam something—surname ending with . . . eba, I believe."

More noisy sipping.

"Do you recognize the name?"

"No."

"Very popular, I understand. Made several appearances on American television a year or two ago."

He waited.

"Do you like jazz?"

"Jazz?"

"Our major borrowing from African culture and some say our only distinctive—"

Eva Mary interrupted to ask for more tea.

"——cultural achievement."

He watched the girl stir sugar into the steaming cup.

"Do you have American records at home? Er—gramophone records?"

"Oh yes, we . . ." a long pause, ". . . have American records. The rockend roll we like. What is jazz?"

Carol smiled brightly over his defeat and changed the subject.

"On your papers," she began, "I noticed that your father has a surname different from yours. Are you a stepdaughter?"

"Stepdaughter?" The black hands, momentarily relinquishing the teacup, turned pink palms up on her knees.

"I mean, dear, is he your real father?"

"Oh yes, he is my real father."

"But I don't understand why your name is different from his."

"The tribe gave us names that are different." She spoke the last word in three distinct syllables.

"Oh."

Apparently finished with her tea, the girl suddenly snatched up the morning *Chronicle* from the arm of the sofa and for five minutes appeared absorbed in an account of a municipal election. Then she turned slowly to look at a far corner of the room, and reaching into the front of her dress, scratched vigorously at a hairless arm-

pit and yawned, stretching her mouth tightly away from an infinity of white teeth. Deutlich, rubbing his aching forehead, heard his wife urge the girl into the guest bedroom.

In minutes Carol was back.

"She's already asleep. She was going to sleep in her dress, but I got her my old flannel nightgown and she wore that. Everything she took off badly needs washing."

Shortly before midnight, Deutlich closed his copy of *Emma* and was about to introduce the ritual of going to bed when he looked up to see Eva Mary standing in the hall doorway. Or rather, Carol's flannel nightgown stood there, with Eva Mary's long neck lifting from it like an ebony sculpture. She seemed strangely tall, unaware and uncaring that her slender Masai body did not at all replace the Nordic amplitude of Carol's. A curious angularity in the lower folds of the garment puzzled Deutlich until he reasoned that she was standing on one foot. A moment later she shifted slightly in the doorway and he could see the long pink sole with its deeply curved arch under the lifted hem. As Carol straightened from her doze over a collection of Conrad stories, the girl folded her arms across her breast, dropped the lifted foot, and smiled a lovely white smile. Then she turned and billowed down the hallway like a cloud and was gone.

Deutlich waited for the sound of the closing door before he turned to his wife. When he saw her tears, he quickly crossed to sit by her and took her in his arms.

"What," she wept against his shoulder, "are we even going to do with that lovely child?"

In a moment before sleeping, Deutlich concluded finally that Carol's were compassionate tears, or, at the very least, the natural consequence, in a woman of an aesthetic experience. Eva Mary *was* a lovely child, and, as a matter of fact, what *were* they to do with her?

Just as the eggs were ready Eva Mary appeared, wearing a red cotton dress crisscrossed with white stripes which gave her the appearance of a wild bird and deepened the red of her protuberant lips. Silently she sat at the place by the window to which she was guided by

Carol. Deutlich was hungry and immediately began on the first of his two boiled eggs. As he ate, he watched the girl lift her cup of coffee, taste it, and with an infant's grimace replace it in the saucer. After a moment she reached for a banana from the fruit bowl in the center of the table and, though it was a very large banana, ate it in three bites with sticky, sucking noises.

Carol now lifted a piece of hot toast from the shiny machine at her left elbow, buttered it heavily and spread it thick with raspberry jam. This dripping combination she handed across the table to Eva Mary, who took it hesitantly.

"This is raspberry jam, dear," she said in her best croon. "It is made from a berry we all love. Go on now, dear, it's delicious."

The girl took a compliant nip with her front teeth at the tiniest corner, and with the same grimace placed the toast on her plate beside the untouched egg.

Deutlich quickly spooned up the second egg, and acquiring the remaining piece of toast, ostentatiously buttered it and added a heaping spoonful of jam, which he plastered studiously out to the edges. This he washed down quickly with hot coffee, sensing his own foolishness in hoping that his appreciative gulps would somehow convince the girl of the error of her taste.

But by now she had peeled and eaten a second banana, and it was apparent from her manner that *her* breakfast, at least, was over. To signify the fact she pushed back her chair and slid from it, in the process knocking a pot of wintering geraniums from the sill behind her. The pot shattered to a strew of earthenware shards and black soil. Looking apprehensively at Deutlich, the girl stood erect and folded her long fingers over her diaphragm.

"Oh, that's too bad, dear," said Carol, going for broom and dustpan. "I shouldn't have placed you so near the window. Here. I'll hold the dustpan and you can sweep."

The girl quickly swept the remnants into the dustpan and finished with a series of quick little sweeps to get the dirt that had slipped under the rubber lip of the pan. Carol scrubbed vigorously with a sponge and then stood up.

"I think the roots are all right and we can save the

plant. As soon as we clean up the kitchen and get Home started we can go to the potting shed and see about it. I don't think it will be too cold for us." After smiling at the girl and patting her bare arm, she went off to the garbage can with the dustpan.

Deutlich stood up, swallowing the last of his by now cold coffee, and went to his study for his briefcase. Instead of kissing his wife, he chose to call goodbye through the kitchen door, for it seemed wrong somehow to make a display of kissing before young African innocence. Just why, he was not sure, any more than he was sure why he was vaguely troubled, as he backed his car from the garage, to see through the kitchen window that Eva Mary was already in an apron and collecting plates and silverware for the dishwasher.

For the first two or three weeks Eva Mary was an exciting presence for Carol. Deutlich knew when his wife was acting out of honest affection; and until nearly the end of November there could be no doubt of her honest affection for the African girl. When Eva Mary learned to bake packaged biscuits (which she did quickly and with no apparent sense of accomplishment) Carol kissed her impulsively on the cheek and hugged her strenuously. That evening she bought the girl a transistor radio and thereafter—for a time—tried to appear undisturbed by the day-long diet of "rockend roll" the noisy little instrument produced, even when Eva Mary chose, as she frequently did, to turn it to its highest volume and dance solemnly, fingers laced behind her head, up and down the living room, as Carol tried to nap in the adjoining bedroom.

During those early weeks Carol's affection showed largely in the giving of gifts. After the radio came a dress with bouffant skirt, white, with matching shoes; a set of scarves in three different colors, with the girl's initials on each; a lacquered box containing lipsticks, eyebrow pencils (Eva Mary's eyebrows were by nature almost invisible) and assorted shades of fingernail polish. But after a trying-on ceremony the clothing remained in her closet untouched, and Carol's offer to do the girl's nails brought only a brief shaking of the small neat head. Carol tried

again, this time with two costly woolen dresses. These went to the closet without so much as a trying-on.

Yet if Deutlich read his wife's mind correctly, her real irritation began not with the girl's rejection of the gifts, but with her eating noises, especially with bananas, which remained her staple food. Early in their marriage Deutlich had had to learn to take his soup tepid rather than hot the way he liked it, for Carol could not tolerate sipping sounds and corrected him by thrusting a finger in her ear and frowning. Once, to counter his enthusiasm for a bowl of hot clam nectar, she had even left the table. Now she had begun the same educational program with Eva Mary.

He remembered the first lesson. (It was also, in a way, the last.) As usual, Eva Mary was making the bulk of her meal from the fruit bowl, having put aside a baked potato, porterhouse steak, and green salad, with only a tentative sip or two at a cup of clear soup. As she was about to demolish the latter half of her second banana, Carol took one herself.

"Eva, dear, let me show you how *we* eat a banana. I'm quite sure it is customary in your country to eat noisily to show your appreciation for the food. We like you to show your appreciation, if that's what it is. But here it is not considered nice to eat . . . well, the way you do, with all that noise. Look." Whereupon she ate the banana, slowly, in at least a dozen small bites, chewing daintily and silently, smiling at the girl, who sat impassively watching.

"There! See how easy it is? Now— You try again and this time eat just like an American lady."

Eva Mary did not care for more, and Deutlich left the table to find his pipe.

By the end of November Deutlich had grown accustomed to nightly reviews of Eva Mary's transgressions— never anything serious and mostly affronts to Carol's sense of her own dignity. He listened and sympathized. He knew his wife was trying hard to make the girl happy and comfortable and yet had been given no real reason to believe she had succeeded. The girl loved to cook (largely, he suspected, because she could turn the shiny gold and chromium dials of Carol's elaborate kitchen

range) and coddled her little radio, but otherwise she remained imperturbable and preternaturally quiet.

The ultimate rift which Deutlich had feared came in mid-December, when Carol tried what she called "an early Christmas"—a gift of a white purse with shoulder strap and matching coin purse full of substantial coins.

"Thank you I don't like it." She spoke in the detached manner Carol herself might use in rejecting a color card offered her by a paint salesman. But Deutlich knew it was very necessary indeed that Eva Mary like that purse. Therefore, when Carol went to the bedroom he waited until it would not appear that he was rushing, and then he followed her.

When he came in she did not look up and he felt the jumping in his stomach for which she was always in one way or another responsible. He sat on the bed and took her hand, which she immediately withdrew.

"I am exhausted," she said finally, in a carefully controlled voice.

"I'm sorry, Carol. Just stay here. I'll see about supper."

"I don't mean that. I'm exhausted from trying to do and be everything for that girl and I don't get anywhere. try and try and try . . ." She turned away from him and her shoulders shook.

"Could I be helping more?"

She turned quickly. "You brought her here!"

A retort just now would be catastrophic, though in quieter time she would find a way of softening, neutralizing, the remark, but without really correcting it. He hoped there was no rebuttal in his face.

"You are away all day and she is here with me. And try so hard . . ." Her lip trembled. "I try so hard to interest her in things and to do things for her but she is cold about it all. She says nothing but yes, or no, or thank you. She never starts a conversation. She never starts anything—just does what I tell her to do. But if I don't tell her to do things she just sits and looks at the floor. If I ask her to help me with something she at least moves."

He reached for her hand again, and though it did not

unfold in his, she did not draw it away, and he was encouraged.

"I know. I have seen it and worried about it but I have never known what to do. The girl has crossed three or four centuries in the last few weeks. I suppose we mustn't ask too much of her."

Carol sat up and put her face so close to his that he was for a moment examining a small clot of mascara in the bunched lashes on her lower left eyelid. "But Homer, is it too much to expect that after crossing those centuries she would at least be a human being? When we are alone I have nothing but a doll. She walks and she sits down and she goes to the bathroom and she eats. But she answers me in monosyllables. It's worse than having no one at all because her being here is such an *enticement*. I want so terribly to be of some use to her but I'm not. I can't talk with her, I can't even find any evidence that she likes being here, that she likes me, or that she has any appreciation for anything—except the stove and that damned radio!"

She blew her nose.

"Not that I expect her to fawn, Homer. But you know what I mean."

He didn't quite, but nodded.

"All I want, Homer, is a *person*."

Deutlich continued to nod, thinking of Eva Mary on that first night, standing angelic in a white gown, bathing them in that glorious smile.

An hour later he and Eva Mary sat at the kitchen table eating bowls of rice and slivers of cold chicken, the only two foods in addition to bananas that Carol had found the girl willing to eat regularly and with any enthusiasm. Deutlich was now having rice for the third day in succession and chicken for the fourth. From time to time he looked at the girl and she at him and when he tried to smile at her she looked quickly downward. She ate close to the bowl and used her fork chiefly as a paddle, pushing rather than lifting the food. Often a grain or two of rice clung to the corners of her dark red mouth.

She did not ask about Carol's absence from the table.

The next day was Saturday and Deutlich was as usual up early. Carol, though still in bed, was awake; and as he

left the bedroom she suggested that he might "talk" to Eva Mary, meaning in effect that he was to ask the girl to change her personality and do it rather quickly. But "talk"? He did not know, any more than Carol, who the girl really was. Or even where the intelligence lay inside all that resistance.

Still in bathrobe and slippers he stepped from the garage into the garden. The air was cold but the sun was bright and he filled his lungs with the crisp air. Before him he saw the sad spectacle of the frost-ruined plants—the tall dahlias, their leaves brown and slimy and flaccid, the wilted chrysanthemums. Only here and there the stocks hinted at further life, in a few delicately colored, tightly rolled buds. He moved from behind a tall thorn bush to get a better look at the stocks; and then he saw the girl. She was crouched before the flower bed, sniffing delicately at a sprig of stock. Her eyes were closed.

Was now the time?

"Good morning, Eva Mary. I . . ."

The girl stood up. In the cold air she wore as usual a bright cotton dress with no sleeves. Silently she handed him the sweet-smelling stem and turned away, walking in long strides to the house. Watching, he absent-mindedly held the buds to his own nostrils.

At breakfast Carol was bright and cheerful, nothing in her manner or appearance suggesting her spasm of the night before. Deutlich took a deep breath when he saw the three bowls of bananas, sliced in a useless attempt to cut down the sound from the girl's eating.

On Christmas morning the girl, with a shy white smile, accepted her gifts—a dozen bandanna handkerchiefs in different colors and a small cardboard box full of costume jewelry—and then went at once to the kitchen, where Deutlich, from his chair in the living room, could see her standing at the sink and hear her humming a high, thin melody of a half-dozen tones in a staccato, repetitive pattern. Opposite him Carol sat with head back, eyes closed, face expressionless.

"Homer, get that girl out of my house!"

He took a deep breath and held it for a moment; but the humming in the kitchen continued.

Crossing the room he took her hand. "Let's go walk in the garden."

She pulled her hand away and turned her face from him.

In the garden he walked alone, watching the heavy dew rapidly soak the edges of his leather slippers. The air was cold, and he shivered.

Carol was now reacting from a deep place he could not reach but only knew about, and the very quietness of her face meant a festering that could infect their lives. The girl must go, and very soon.

But how to do it? He could not look into those quiet eyes and say something brutal—"We don't want you here any more." What to do?

Two days after Christmas Carol announced, almost formally, with a significant look at Deutlich, that she would be away for dinner—a League dinner, with a business meeting afterward. He and Eva Mary were to have rice, lamb (a recent addition to the girl's acceptable fare), and of course bananas for dessert. He recognized that the crisis had come.

At dinner there was no conversation. The girl sucked noisily at her meat and rice, head low over her plate, sitting up only to drink her tea with long, drawn-out hisses of the kind that made Carol wince.

After her second banana, the girl cleared the table while Deutlich tried to read the evening paper but found his concentration fixed on the clatter of dishes in the kitchen.

At last he heard the hum of the dishwasher and the sound of the clothesbin shutting, which meant that she had disposed of the damp dishcloth with which she had wiped the table—just as Carol had taught her to do. When she came into the living room he was prepared to sound friendly and jocular.

"Eva Mary, I'm going for a walk. Would you like to come?" It was an improvised idea, and as soon as he had spoken he wondered what he would do or say if she said no.

"Yes, I would like to walk."

"It is cold enough for you to wear a coat." She had not

understood about winter in California (the pictures they had sent were made in June) and she had not brought a coat.

"You can wear one of Carol's." He brought her one, an old camel's hair Carol had worn at college. It hung on the black girl unevenly and the seams sagged at the shoulders.

He had not thought about a place to go or even a direction. But there was always the bay. The wind would be cold there but she would be warm in the coat.

As they walked silently, smelling the heavy scent of eucalyptus in the crisp air, they began to see the low-flying gulls, and in twenty minutes they were standing on the quay by the yacht harbor. A heavy fog lay over the far shore. He did not try to think of anything to say. Water lapped against the pilings beneath them. Disappearing in the gray mist were the running lights of a small boat. He could feel the beads of fog gathering in his nostrils. Overhead, above the clouds, the Los Angeles plane was putting down for the field to the north where he had gone for Eva Mary two months ago.

As the plane was directly overhead he felt his hand gripped by a smaller hand, cold and shivering.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Eva Mary. I didn't realize you would be so cold. We'll go right home."

The girl did not release his hand, though except for the hand he would have been hardly aware of her being there. She moved beside him like a dancer, gliding over the curbs, slowing or quickening her pace to match his.

He found he was sweating in the cold.

Until they were within sight of the house he tried not to think of what he must do. For the first time since leaving the quay, he looked down at her face, and she smiled. Perhaps they could talk inside the house.

As he helped her out of the coat, she put her arms around him suddenly and laid her head for an instant against his chest.

"I think it is too bad for you that your wife does not have babies."

Then she was in her room and at once he heard the little radio: "Because you're mine—I'll walk the line. . . ."

He started toward the sound, stopped, sat down, and for a long time stared through the window at a pepper tree, ugly in its winter depression.

The next morning at breakfast he had just finished his last cup of coffee and Carol had already moved the toaster from the table to its place in the cupboard when he found Eva Mary looking at him.

"I think I will be going home."

Deutlich put down his cup. Carol turned quickly.

"What's that, dear?"

"I think I will be going home."

At that moment he hated Carol because of the quick light in her face.

"Home? But, dear, we . . ." Occupation with the silverware allowed her to leave the sentence unfinished.

"I would like to go Tuesday. Will arrangements be difficult?"

"Just a clearance from Internal Revenue and, of course, the reservation. Won't you have lots of things to tell your people? Just think . . ."

Deutlich left the table to pack his briefcase for a day at the library, stopping off in the bathroom for aspirin.

Tuesday was New Year's Day and the airport was not crowded. In the long foyer they walked up and down looking at the display cases. Carol was gay. Eva Mary wore the man's suitcoat and her dress with the white stripes.

Then the amplifiers announced the London plane and they went out to it. Carol put a bundle of new magazines in the girl's arms and touched her lips to the dark cheek. Deutlich once more felt the cold hand, and then he and Carol watched as the girl in her long stride crossed the concrete and climbed the ramp toward the hole in the side of what appeared to be the same great aluminum fish that had delivered her in October. She turned and looked back, smiling, long neck raising her chin high, and then the hole closed. Moments later the plane was gone, leaving trails of black smoke.

Carol walked away quickly, ahead of him, and he moved faster to catch up. He expected her to be crying, and she was. Just before he opened the car door for her

he looked up again and saw a final glint of metal to the north.

"Do you suppose," she sobbed as she sat down, "she will ever forgive us?"

Sarah

Martin J. Hamer

IT snowed on Thanksgiving Day. With the wonder of all the preparations and the knowledge that a man was coming to visit, the snow was more than Clyde could bear. "It's snowing!" he screamed. "Mama, it's snowing!" In a frenzy he ran into the kitchen to tell his mother the news. He was in the way; he was sent back into the living room. He came sneaking back, frightening his Aunt Bea with a loud "Boo!" He ran out again and opened the window. The snow was falling in great silver flakes. He took what he could catch in his hands and blew it across the room. "Snow! Snow!" he cried. He was placed in a chair and given a magazine.

Bea Boyce had come early to help out. She was a rotund woman, forty-six years of age, with a romantic air and quick brown eyes. As she moved around and around setting the open-leafed table, her taffeta dress swished and swirled about her and she hummed in a very high key. She placed the silverware with elaborate care and folded the linen napkins into white fluffed caps. When she remembered that the shoes she wore were open at the toes, she said aloud to no one in particular that she hoped Mr. Boyce would think to bring her rubbers. Then she began to whistle "The Twelve Days of Christmas," the wobbly sound coming from between her large, pursed lips, the effort hollowing her cheeks and arching her penciled-in eyebrows. Sarah called from the kitchen that house whistling was bad luck.

"It's not Christmas, anyway," Clyde said. "It's Thanksgiving!" His aunt rolled her eyes at him, and he pushed

himself into the farthest corner of the chair and tried to roll his eyes at her.

"You're getting too cute," she said. "Mr. George will fix you, though. He's going to fix your wagon, but good!"

"Don't frighten the boy," said Sarah. She came from the kitchen with the water glasses tinkling in her slender hands, and after placing them on the table she viewed herself solemnly in the mirror. Her hair was drawn straight back from her oval face, and her pierced ears showed tiny pearl earrings to match the necklace hanging in the fullness of her breast. Unlike her sister's, her brown pupils moved slowly. Her expression was apprehensive, and there was the suggestion of a clown's sorrow about her mouth where the lipstick had been drawn boldly onto the dark facial skin of her upper lip. Turning her body from side to side, she smoothed her purple dress about her hips and asked Bea, "How do I look?"

"Like a belle of the ball," said Bea.

Sarah frowned. "A belle of the ball at forty. A real belle of the ball." She placed one leg out in front of her and pressed a hand to its knee. "I think this dress is too short."

"What do you mean, too short? Look at mine!"

"Yours is too short too," Sarah said.

"Well, honey, that's the style these days."

"Dress like this will only put ideas in his head."

"And that ain't what you want?"

"I most certainly do *not*. Getting a man means about as much to me as getting an ice-cream cone."

"Which is why," said Bea, "you're making all this fuss about dinner." She went back to the table and fluffed a fallen napkin. "You just better pray that Ann's not in one of her moods. 'Cause, child, she'll sure mess things up for you."

"She'd better not," said Sarah angrily. "She'd just better be on her *p*'s and *q*'s if she knows what's good for her."

"I can't see why you even invited her. You know how she is."

"I invited her for the same reason I invited you—you're family."

"Well," said Bea, "remember what Papa used to say: Ain't nothing worse—Ain't nothing worse than family."

"I just wish you'd shut up," said Sarah, "for once!"

The doorbell rang, and Clyde scrambled into the hallway calling, "Who is it? Who is it?"

"It's me!"

"It's me!"

"It is I," shouted the final and strongest voice from far below, and his Aunt Ann's three boys came thundering up the four flights to the landing. They swept past him shaking snow, fists, and tongues in his face. When Ann appeared on the landing, she took his small bewildered form in her arms and pressed him deep into the damp fur collar of her coat. Before they were inside, the bell rang again and Mr. Boyce came up the stairs puffing. A great wool muffler swathed his neck, and his mustache sparkled with melting snow. Bea Boyce made it clear to everyone that he had not thought enough to bring her rubbers.

Ann sat near the oilstove and warmed her bony frame in its shimmering heat. She was dressed in black, and the huge iron cross that hung about her neck made her corner of the room solemnly remote. Mr. Boyce sprawled on the couch, hung one hand on his vest pocket in the manner of a train conductor, and caressed his bushy mustache with the other. His wife fluttered among the children like a bird. "The boys have grown," she said. "They give no trouble," replied Ann. In less than ten minutes, thought Sarah, they've used Clyde's caps, broken his gun, crushed a plastic soldier, and rolled most of his marbles under the piano. "Well," she said loudly, "you all just make yourselves comfortable." "Gimme that!" said Ann's oldest. Without looking up, Ann said, "Now, now." Then she reached into her purse and took out her Bible. Sarah picked up a cigarette from the table and started to light it. Mr. Boyce brought out a fat cigar. "I hope you're not going to light that thing before dinner," said Bea. He glowered at her, rolling the fat cigar between his jaundiced-looking fingers. He harrumphed and placed it back in his pocket. Sarah's match popped loudly, and Mr. Boyce watched as a cloud of smoke obscured her. "Blow a smoke ring, Aunt Sarah! Blow a smoke ring!" Bea

frowned, the doorbell rang, and everyone became silent. When a light rap sounded at the door, Bea crossed her legs and whispered to Mr. Boyce to sit straight. Ann took one hand from her Bible and began to finger her cross. Her boys gaped stupidly at the door, and Clyde moved cautiously toward his mother. Sarah closed her eyes and prayed: Please, Lord, don't let anything go wrong. "Come in!" she called. "Come in!"

A huge man entered, his black coat glistening with melted snow, and immediately a chilled air, heavy with the pungent odor of stale tobacco, spread about the room. "Come in, Mr. George," said Sarah. "Come in and meet the folks." He removed his coat and stood before them in a neat but tattered blue suit, a bright new white shirt, and a faded maroon-colored tie. His gaze moved easily from face to face; his slightly graying hair and soft features made him appear calm, but there was the indication of surprise in his manner and his brow was drawn and deeply furrowed. Sarah introduced him to Mr. Boyce. "How do you do, sir," said Mr. George. Mr. Boyce was flattered. He pumped the tall man's arm, mumbling that it was a pleasure to meet a gentleman. Bea was squirming on the couch all the while, and by the time she was introduced her skirts were so high you could see where her stockings ended. When Sarah saw that Mr. George had noticed, she said, "Now, you wouldn't think she was the oldest, would you?" Everyone was silent. "And," Sarah went on loudly, "over here's my other sister, Ann."

Ann extended her left hand, holding onto her cross with her right. "I've heard a lot about you," she said.

"Thank you," said Mr. George warmly.

"I wouldn't be so quick to say thank you if I were you. You're not at all what I expected."

Mr. George stopped smiling. Sarah quickly said, "These are all her boys, except one. This one." She pushed Clyde forward. "This is Clyde. Well," she said to the boy, "what do you say?" Clyde stared at Mr. George and then retreated back behind Sarah.

"Boy sure needs to be taught," said Ann. "I've never seen a child so backward."

The fire could be heard burning in the oilstove, and Sarah closed her eyes to pray to God. "I brought you

these," said Mr. George awkwardly. When Sarah turned, he was handing her two brown-paper-wrapped packages. Embarrassed, she mumbled "Thank you" and looked toward the floor. He was standing in a small puddle of dark water. "One of you boys fetch a piece of newspaper," she said loudly. "And one of you come take the gentleman's coat." Ann's boys moved furiously about the room. "The paper's in there," she screamed. "Take the coat in there, and the rest of you go get washed! Bea! Come help me in the kitchen." Bea rose like a princess, the swishing sound of her dress adding to the confusion. "Hurry up now, you boys," Sarah screamed. "Put those things up! Get washed! Dinner's almost ready." She turned to leave the room; she turned back. "Oh, have a seat, Mr. George. Do have a seat."

"And, dear Lord," droned Ann, asking the blessing, "help those of us who have erred from your path of righteousness and who are even now sittin' in your house, at your table, eatin' your food without your grace." One of her boys snickered. A loud pop echoed in the silence, and as Ann continued the boy whimpered softly, the short, gurgling wheeze of his breath punctuating his sobs. "God, we thank you for this food which we are about to receive, for the nourishin' of the body, and for Christ's sake"—she looked up—"Amen."

"Amen," they all chorused.

"Leg or breast?" asked Sarah. "Just let me know." She carved the turkey, and the plates were passed in silence, filled with turnips, rice, and bread stuffing. Clyde poured the gravy on his plate for so long that Mr. Boyce quipped, "That bird can't swim, son." Everyone laughed; Bea frowned; then she went out of her way to pass Mr. George the bread. Struggling to cut her share of the bird, Sarah took time to make note. I'm going to have to speak to her before this day is over.

"How many churches, Mr. George," Ann began slowly, "do they have out there in Queens?" She rested her fork on her plate, the effort of the question distracting her from eating.

"What kind of churches?" asked Mr. George.

"Baptist," came the reply.

"Wouldn't know," he said curtly. "I'm Episcopalian."

Mr. Boyce grinned. Ann stiffened her bony frame until it looked like a cattail over her boys. "How many of those do you have, then?"

Mr. George hesitated and looked toward the ceiling. In the interim Mr. Boyce belched. Sarah waited for him to excuse himself; then she asked Mr. George, "Did you know that the Boyces are business people? They own that candy store at the corner, one of the nicest in the neighborhood."

"Is that so?" said Mr. George.

"You in business too?" asked Mr. Boyce.

"No, not me," he said. "Don't you know I work with Sarah?"

"I thought you met in a dance hall," said Ann.

"I just read in the paper," said Mr. Boyce, "about two people who got married."

"What's that got to do with anything?" asked Bea.

"If you'd let me finish." He wiped his mouth, "I was going to say they got married in a dance hall."

"Couldn't be no worse sin," said Ann. She placed a finger in her mouth, and to Clyde's wonder and Sarah's chagrin removed a small bone covered with masticated food.

"Is that the wishbone?" Clyde asked.

"If it is," chimed Mr. Boyce, "better give it to his mama." He chuckled; Sarah banged her fork onto her plate, rose, and announced that she was going for dessert. In the kitchen she leaned against the cupboard and cried. They were all against her, and Bea was even trying to make time with him. Nothing's worse than family. Nothing's worse. Oh, Papa! Why'd you have to be right? She moved to get the dessert plates and saw the packages on the table. Unwrapping them carefully, she found the first was a bottle of Scotch; the second, a fuzz-covered monkey in a red velvet suit. It played a blue metal drum and raised a plastic bowler while marching to the sound of an unsteady, tinny beat. I don't know what he sees in me. Lord! I sure don't know what he sees in me. But if You let him go on seeing it, I'll treat him well, I swear it. I'll treat him well.

She re-entered the room and was pleased to see that

Mr. George had become the center of attention. He had grown up not far from them on St. Nicholas Avenue, and he was telling them how nice Harlem was in those days. "Curtains at all the foyer windows," he said. "And I used to make my money by going around polishing the mail-boxes."

"Yeah," said Mr. Boyce, "those were really the days. Really the days—"

"Now, out in Queens, where I am now—" he went on.

Sarah thought of Queens. Beautiful Queens. That's where she'd like to live. Throw out all this junk and move to Queens. Only thing I'd keep—she looked about the room—is the piano; Clyde will have to learn to play someday. And maybe the couch. It needs a new cover. With a new cover it won't look so bad. She straightened her shoulders, walked to the table, and handed Clyde the monkey. "Say thank you to Mr. George," she prompted.

"Is that his father?" asked Ann's youngest.

"Hush!" said Ann.

"That's all right," Mr. George said. "Children don't know any better."

"You sure have a fine sense for the pumps in life," said Bea.

"Bumps!" corrected Mr. Boyce.

"Bumps, pumps!" screamed Bea. "No matter what you call it, you ain't got it!"

Mr. Boyce harrumphed and looked down at the tablecloth.

"Can't get together, get apart," said Ann sweetly. "Man's a worse worry than hell."

"Is that why you ain't got one!"

"Okay, now, you all," said Sarah.

"Okay yourself," screamed Bea. "You ain't much better. Different one every time you turn around!"

"Why don't you shut up!"

"Look to God," said Ann. "You all better learn to look to God for your happiness. Better put your faith in the Lord—"

Tears blurred Sarah's vision. I'm going to move to Queens, she thought. Beautiful Queens. And I'm not going to see any of them again.

The dessert was eaten in silence. Afterward, Bea announced that she would do the dishes, and Ann offered to help. Sarah sat with Mr. George on the couch while Ann's boys, who had overeaten, moved more or less circuitously about the room. They stumbled into furniture and relatives like doped flies until finally the two younger ones crashed into one another and fell to the floor and to sleep. The oldest one continued to traverse the route for about five more minutes, and then, on receiving a sudden call from nature, he departed for the bathroom. He was found sometime later, asleep on the stool. Clyde, no longer finding it necessary to protect his monkey, fell asleep near the stove, and in the big chair nearby, Mr. Boyce, his belt and shoes undone, began to snore. Soft shadows moved across the cracked plaster walls of the green room. Only an occasional clatter of a dish or piece of silverware from the kitchen interrupted the silence. Mr. George yawned, stretched, and let his big hand fall lightly on Sarah's thigh. She jumped. "What do you think I am?" she said.

"We're finished," said Ann, entering the room. "Well, will you look at this." She motioned toward her boys and Bea's husband. "Child, what did you put in that food? All right now, c'mon"—she clapped her hands. "Everybody up and out! Dinner's over, day's over, time to go home and to bed!"

The confusion began again. Mr. Boyce wanted Mr. George's address; Sarah could not find a pencil. Bea came back from the window with the news that so much snow had fallen none of them would be able to get home. "Then you all better hurry now," said Sarah, "before it gets worse." She could not find a pencil, so Mr. Boyce stood in the middle of the room and repeated Mr. George's phone number over and over again until all of the boys were shouting it at the top of their lungs. Finally Sarah got them all to the door. "Good-bye." "Good-bye." "Gimme that!" "So long." "You must come by the store sometime." "Mama! He took my—" "Whenever you stop here, stop there." "Fine dinner, Sarah," said Mr. Boyce. "Why don't you come to church sometime?" "Gimme!" "Will you two behave! Give him back his monkey!" "So long, Mr. George," said Mr. Boyce. "Don't come crying

to me," said Ann. "Stop it! You're pulling my clothes off." "Good-bye." "Good-bye." "So long." They left. Sarah watched them from the window, a huddled group of people in the cold night and the snow. "The world is a beautiful place," she said softly.

"What'd you say?" asked Mr. George.

"I said the world is a beautiful place."

"Only sometimes," he said. "Only sometimes."

Sarah sighed, discouraged that he could not feel what she felt, and began to tidy the room. She cleaned around Clyde, who had fallen asleep in a chair. She emptied the ashtrays and picked up bits of paper from the floor. Then she put the lights out, leaving the oilstove to light the room, and sat down on the couch next to Mr. George. "There's something I'd like to tell you," she said.

"What beats me," he interrupted, "is why you invited your whole family. I thought it was just going to be me, you, and the boy."

"You had to meet them sometime," she said, annoyed. "Anyway, I love my family—"

"Do they always act like that?" he asked.

"Like what?"

"Never mind," he said, and was silent.

She leaned back on the couch. "There's something I have to tell you. Mr. George, I have to know how you feel about something I have to tell you."

He drew in his mouth reflectively and slapped a hand to his knee. "OK," he said, "I'm listening."

"Once I made a mistake," she went on slowly, "of not telling a fellow all about me. When people come to find out things about you later, they sometimes come to hate you. I want to tell you the worst things about me. That way, if you can't understand, we can quit and neither of us will be the worse off for it. If we stay together, I don't want to have any secrets from you."

"Sort of like a test, huh?" said Mr. George.

"Sort of," said Sarah. "I just hope I pass."

"Well, listen now, Sarah, I don't care about—"

"Hush! I've got to tell you this! Just like I had to have you meet my family—no matter how they treat me. You'll just have to understand. I want to tell you about

Clyde's father." She paused, and when he remained quiet, she went on. "I met him in a museum five years ago when I was doing day-work on Fifty-seventh Street. I used to walk past that museum every day. They had this fence made out of wooden slats, and inside was a garden, a beautiful garden with a black stone pool and statues and everything. After a while I got to thinking that one day I was going to go there. Can you imagine that? Me, going to that museum. Well, one day I did." She stopped and listened. It was the wind gently rattling the sashes and tapping the snow lightly against the panes. "I'll never forget that day. It was a Sunday in August, and I had on my blue cotton dress, the one with the paisley print, and my white heels and white gloves. I was really dressed to kill. Really dressed to kill. I left my madam at two that afternoon, went straight there, and when I got inside I went to the lunchroom, ordered myself a glass of iced tea, and took it straight to the patio. I can't begin to tell you how I felt. There I was inside, sitting down, and I could see the place where I used to look through. Do you understand what I'm trying to say? Do you?"

"Sort of," said Mr. George. He stared steadily into the fire, rubbing the tips of his thumbs together.

"Well," Sarah said, "after a while I felt like I'd been there all my life. In fact, I was even getting a little bored, and then this fellow came up. He came over to my table and sat down. Just like that. He came over, sat down, and started to talk. We went together that same afternoon, and we stayed together after, for a year. I was really a fool." She shook her head sadly. "Some fool. But I loved him. I loved him because I could respect him. But I guess I respected him too much. I started being honest with him, and he started to hate me."

"What were you honest about?" asked Mr. George.

"I told him about the men I'd known. I never loved any of them, but I was hurt plenty, and even though it was in the past I had to tell him."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I guess it made me feel better. I don't know. The important thing is that he couldn't stand knowing I'd been with other men. And when I got preg-

nant, we broke up." She paused. "Ain't you going to say nothing?"

"What's there to say?" said Mr. George. He rested his head on the back of the couch and touched her shoulder with his hand. She stood up. "I'd better get Clyde to bed, and I think I'm getting a little sleepy too."

"You're—"

"Clyde! Get up and go to bed." He rose, half asleep, leaving his monkey balanced precariously in the chair, and left the room.

"You're sure making it hard for me," said Mr. George.

"Not if you're a man, I ain't making it hard. A man is supposed to understand a woman's weakness."

"That's not what I'm—"

"He's supposed to understand anything."

"OK!" shouted Mr. George. "I understand. Now, for the love of God, let's talk about something else."

"I wish I could! I wish I could meet somebody who could make me forget about him. Somebody with just a little of his good side. You know, he took me to more places in that one year than I've ever been before—or since! And please, don't get the idea that I'm saying we don't go out. I just mean he took me downtown, to places we can't afford to go to."

Mr. George stood. "Sarah, what do you want?"

She was silent for a while, and then she answered, "I don't know."

"Well," he said, "since you had your say tonight, maybe I'd better have mine." He paused while she sat down on the couch. "I like you." He turned from her and watched the shadows on the wall. "As far as anything else goes, I guess I ain't happy and I ain't sad. I'm sure not rich—but I ain't poor either. I ain't ugly and I ain't good-looking, and I don't like going downtown among white folks. They make me nervous."

The fire in the stove had burned low. The room was almost dark, and he could barely see her face in the remaining light. "Will you look see how much oil's left in the stove?" she asked. He stooped and then kneeled, peering about the hot metal carefully. "Not much," he finally said. "Looks like it's on *E*."

"Well then, you'd better turn it out." He fumbled

about for the knob while she went on talking in a low voice. "I've been on pins and needles all day," she said. "I wanted everything to go right. I even prayed to God." She went over to him. He was still fumbling about the stove, and when she touched him he tried to rise, almost knocking it over. "Damn it! I've never known a man to be so clumsy." His slap sent her crashing into the chair. "Oh, God," she cried, "aren't there any men left anywhere in this world!"

"*Chica, chica, chica, chi—ca, chi—ca, chi—ca.*" The fuzz-covered monkey in his red velvet suit stopped drumming when he bumped into her leg. She reached down, picked it up, and hurled it at him in the darkness.

Sherry

Maureen Howard

DURING the war I began to come to New York two or three times a year to visit my cousin Sherry. New York as I knew it with Sherry has nothing to do with my life now. Returning years later, I am still a novice in the city. Her world was constructed of distorted pieces of time: work-a-day nights, supper at dawn, dreams in the afternoon—toast, coffee, and a quick shower in the evening.

The only way my cousin and her friends ever let on that they knew the moon still drew the tides, that the stars still moved in the heavens—not on 45th Street—was in their devotion to the big aluminum sun lamp under which they “took five.” When the girls came back to Sherry’s after the last show in whatever club or chorus line they were working, they all—except Sally, the Negro singer—had a go at the big bulb. As I watched, hunched and happy in my corner, there was always a lovely body smeared with oil turning under the ultra-violet rays. Aside from the uniform orange pallor which the showgirls imagined was natural, nothing in their routine acknowledged the day, or allowed that there were other places in the city besides all-night Automats, late subways, blue-lit bars and bright swinging rooms at four o’clock in the morning.

I used to arrive in New York in the late afternoon on Saturday and find my way to the newest address I had for Sherry, for in those days she was never with the same friends or in the same apartment. Back home it took hours of cajoling my mother and the aunts before I could get away to the bus station and make the train in Bridgeport. I was told I had no business with Mary Elizabeth in New York when they didn’t know where she lived, or

with what kind—and Mary Elizabeth (last seen in one of those dirty little news sheets with her bum bare to the world) had no business with me. I promised myself to get to the city early to see the Metropolitan Museum or a play, or to walk in the busy streets, but they got the best of me: I was always late. I would come from the everlasting darkness of the platform in Grand Central into a radiant palace, the main waiting-room. There in an antechamber I would clean up and apply the “Raven Red” lipstick I dared not wear at home. With my mouth the color of dried blood, I sauntered down to the Oyster Bar for a bowl of chowder, a black coffee and a puff on whatever cigarette came in the fanciest package. Outside, New York was not the movieland of flashing neon, blinding marquees and bright windows I now expect; it seemed all office buildings—thick, high, menacing—blacked out for the duration. The time was right; Sherry would be getting up.

To greet me she wore a silk dressing gown of a confused oriental design—mandarin neck, kimono sleeves—and her eyes, slits puffed with sleep, were fittingly exotic. As soon as I arrived the rush to the chorus line began. There was only one uncluttered moment, time enough for one of the changing cast of characters to say, “You must be Sherry’s cousin!”—not that I resembled Mary Elizabeth in any way; I looked such a kid, though I must have been nearly twenty, bumping through the hall with a hick suitcase.

“Something to eat, Ag? A cup of coffee?” Sherry displayed her hostess smile, and I’m sure she thought there was a tasty sugar plum somewhere. She *wanted* one for me, but I knew there was only the stale metallic coffee, the bleak ice box with a quart of skimmed milk and a few forgotten apples.

“No, I’ve eaten.”

“I tell you what—” Sherry said, inspired in the old way—“I tell you what, Mary Agnes, we’ll go over to Aunt Lil’s and ask for ice cream and she’ll come through with enough money for the movies. . . .” “I tell you what, Mary Agnes; after we do the dishes we’ll go down to the drug store and buy a *Silver Screen*; we’ll work on my Ginger Rogers routine, we’ll play pinochle. . . .” “I tel

you what, Mary Agnes, we'll send out for sandwiches at the theater and you can have a big milkshake." So it was at all times for Sherry: life might seem a little makeshift right now—no parents, crabby aunts, hand-me-down clothes, but it was only a matter of making it through a single grey moment into the bright future. And I must say she escaped the dingy days of our childhood. If in the end things didn't turn out right it wasn't her fault. She tried; she made it; it was just that the big world was not what she imagined.

In those days when I visited Mary Elizabeth I found myself waiting on the edge of a bed while her friends threw stockings and slippers from their jumbled bureaus and spidery drying racks. I remember trying to tuck my big feet out of the way, scrunching myself to the wall, but if I suggested waiting outside Sherry turned to me in surprise:

"You just came, Honey. When can I see you?" And the girls agreed I was no trouble at all. It was years before I sensed that they created the confusion of mismatched hose, tipped-over cologne bottles and make-up stains on the dresser—the scene lit by an infuriating fifteen-watt bulb over the mirror. To have me sitting around the house at breakfast time would have disrupted an ordinary household, but none of Sherry's friends wanted to be mistaken for ordinary Betty Boops who ate cereal in the morning. They all practiced wackiness as a religion: they worked hard and long on outlandish pompadours and upsweeps, silver eyelids and glistening talons. Then, coated with ideal artificiality, they went forth into the unsuspecting street, onto a shocked bus, into the glare of the dressing room, where they started all over again to defeat the bit of nature that *would* show through on their pretty faces. They were all simple girls—like Mary Elizabeth—with simple names. Once she shared an apartment with singing sisters from Milwaukee—Jean, Jane and Joan—I never sorted them out.

No matter how ardently Sherry tried for the bizarre effect with pitch mascara and false fingernails, she had a natural beauty which the most extreme maculations could not destroy. Her hair was red, not at all that Irish-red that brings the obvious stare, but the color of black roses, a mysterious shade that women try to imitate without

success. With Sherry all was real: her hair, her height, the bones of her cheeks, the cleft in her chin—and her smile was as fresh the last time I saw her as it was the night years and years ago when her mother, old, finished at thirty, carried her up the back steps into our kitchen. My mother and Francis and I stood weighted with sleep while this child we had never laid eyes on, Mary Elizabeth Hurley in an outgrown coat, smiled at us as though we had invited her to a grand birthday party, right then, that minute.

"We'll give her some warm milk," Mary Elizabeth's mother said, "and put her to bed." But the child—almost a year older than me, almost seven—had to show us her pretty, impractical shoes with "T" straps. Her baby girl legs, without leggings, were red from the cold night air; her dress was taffeta with a sash, the sort I wore only for Sunday. Soon we were all having ginger-ale and cookies—at three o'clock in the morning.

"Where's Jack, then?" my mother asked.

"Off. He's gone off."

Mary Elizabeth's mother took off her close felt hat, and then we could see her hair, the same depth of red she had given her child, hanging in dead broken strands over her ears.

"Gone for good this time," she said. "We'll not see him again."

"You've no such luck," my mother said gently. And she was right; he did come back soon—to watch his young wife die.

He was Black Irish, handsome Jack Hurley; he sat in our front room during that awful week, sobered-up in a cloud of cigar smoke, waiting for God to be merciful—until the very last hour, after the priest had gone; then, cursing himself, he knelt by the bed, where the woman who grew beautiful again as she died put out her frail hand with great effort—to comfort him.

Mary Elizabeth told us her father could sing and play the banjo and the mandolin and slide a quarter into his cuff and make the fifty-cent piece in his hand disappear.

"Nobody will contradict that," my mother told her crossly if she was within hearing, and soon our pretty cousin understood it was best to tell me—Francis didn't

believe—the marvelous stories about Jack Hurley and other imaginary princes, in secret, behind the couch or up on the attic stairs. Sometimes at Christmas Jack Hurley sent cheap jewelry which Mary Elizabeth raised from the cotton wadding with reverence—like St. Thérèse pictured on a holy card accepting the Rosary from the Virgin's hand—and she would wear the little necklace or bracelet until her neck or wrist were ringed with green and the green turned black. Then my mother scrubbed her skin raw, and tears hung on her dark lashes. One ring her father sent with a yellow stone set in golden prongs tore her face in the night, and Aunt Mae, helping my mother bathe the sores with Lysol solution, said he must have got that one out of a Cracker Jack box. Jack Hurley never remembered his daughter's birthday—none of the grown-ups did, for I suppose though they had to take her in as a child of seven they didn't want to celebrate her clouded birth. I don't know actually when or where she came to be, but Sherry told me once in New York that her parents had run off together to Providence—much in love, so happy that all those fat hens couldn't hold them. From bits I overheard I presume she was born in a charity ward to a frightened girl with another fake ring on her finger while Jack Hurley disported himself (that was the word they used) in a barroom.

It didn't take long for the sweet sadness of her mother's death to wear off and the edginess to come back in the aunts' voices. Mary Elizabeth was another mouth to feed, another body to dress, and we heard that often enough. It didn't take long for her to learn that she was lovelier than other girls, even in faded dresses and cut-down coats, so she smiled and helped with the dishes to get ten cents for her dancing lessons or for the piano lesson with the music Sister after school. No, it never occurred to me, towering on spindle legs above the children my own age, gaping down at the top of their heads through steel-rimmed glasses (which finally uncrossed my eyes), to be affronted by her beauty.

"She has Catherine's hair," they said fondly. "She has his eyes." That was all she did have, after all: the remarkable smile, the glorious red hair, the chin dented with the shadow of her father. Later, after Sherry had

used her looks to get other treats: furs and checkbooks—a free ride beyond anything her aunts could imagine—I often thought that was all she had and nothing more.

My Uncle Peter would take her on his knee, and poor Jim, Mae's silent asthmatic husband, would chase her around the table with a wheezy laugh. My father, who never could manage my long limbs, took Sherry under his arm and swung her easily, almost dropping her to the floor, then catching her; and up she flew again through the stuffy living room with giggles and shrieks of delight. They forgot for a minute where they were and made the close brown room a wild, dangerous ring for their acrobatic feats. The truth was that her uncles loved to play with her. Such feminine grace, though only in a child, recalled their own lost charm of manhood which had been nicely put aside by the scrubbing, cooking, endlessly talking women they had married. And Sherry (Mary Elizabeth to them of course) knew instinctively how to wink at her admirers, how to toss her head of bouncing ringlets and arch her black eyebrows in surprise at every kiss.

If I make her sound like a detestable coy child, a baby movie star, I give the wrong impression. She had a talent for loving men, for giving herself freely, which she did not defile till years later, long after most women have deceived even themselves. The lonely kid throwing her arms around our Uncle Peter's neck was no different than the nervous woman in the best restaurant smiling at some man over the corpse of an extravagant fish: Sherry meant it every time.

In eighth grade her legs suddenly grew long and sleek, and she could tap the whole length of the auditorium platform in twirls—and did for the class one afternoon—her skirt twirling up too, exposing pink garters, until the frenzied rapping of Sister Mary Edmond called a halt. Mary Elizabeth would not dance for graduation—let Lou Magee recite the funny piece where she took off a lady going to the dentist.

"But I can sing," Mary Elizabeth said, and began "Mexicali Rose" with all her heart. Then we were transported from that damp school basement with the water running in the toilets down the hall to an unfamiliar place of yearning flesh and sad withdrawal. Hers was a thin

voice, high, forced into the low lusty throbs of the blues—a poor imitation to be sure, but how did the eighth grade of St. Augustine's know, how did Sister Mary Edmond know. Sherry wailed, a woman before us, of the disasters that would come upon us soon enough; and she sang at graduation finally, bound into a white organdy dress meant for a child. She sang out for everyone else's parents: "Hark, hark the lark at Heav'ns gate sings and Phoebus 'gins arise."

In the Freshman Talent Show at high school there was no holding her back. A whole new audience of boys from all over town whistled and stamped for more after she exhausted her two dance routines. There was her shape, undeniable now, and her hair brushed back into waves blending into the red velvet curtain on the stage. She was admired in Pappadoulous' Sweet Shop all afternoon while I did the Latin homework for us both on the dining-room table. If I envied her, it was only for a moment, when one of the perfect boys in saddle shoes and a pork-pie hat came and broke the terrible dullness of our house with lively shuffling and patronizing good will until the queen made her entrance. And she was, without seeking the title, the queen of Central High, gracious in the corridors, stately in class, a presence in the girls' lunchroom—never with unseemly pride, but with the inherent simplicity of royalty in her plain clothes.

"Come along, Ag," she would say on a sunny afternoon when a carload of boys waited in front of our house, and she would lure some poor sap who wanted to gaze at her into asking me. I was vulnerable on different grounds then, and couldn't stand the contempt in their eyes, the gagging politeness in their mouths, so I preferred to stay at home with my library books. Later on, when Sherry wanted me to come to New York, it didn't matter: I had accepted myself, an ugly cousin, my sharp nose pressed against the sweet-shop window.

There are many girls who come to flower at the silly age of fifteen or sixteen and hold their loveliness like perishable blooms. I am shocked to meet them in the stores downtown and discover them wilted at twenty, bodies already turning to hard pods, closed to possibility and change. It might have happened to my cousin if she

had fallen in love with one of her high-school beaux; but she never really had a chance even for that deadening solution; she was too spectacular for our factory town.

I can't come up with the answer to Mary Elizabeth, any more than *she* could, though a Park Avenue psychiatrist furnished her with long plausible stories to tell. There was the rootlessness of Jack Hurley in her that wanted nothing to do with two-family houses and supper at six o'clock; and like her father she was always performing just a little—her walk, her smile, the inventions that brightened the evenings when we sat together at algebra and French. Being no one at home but an orphan with a name that was bad cess and a burden to my mother who was looking for crosses to bear, Mary Elizabeth hoped in her adolescent fantasy to be someone even grander than Aunt Lil, who had married a lawyer, to dwell in a land more magical than the one green hill across the river where rich people lived. For years, while I learned to accept a hall-bedroom and the lonely oblong of my face, I told that incredible person in the mirror, substance of myself, that it was her beauty that set her free. Such nonsense: that perfection of form trapped her; she became a rare animal, a spirit caged within her own body.

Mr. Garafano, the used-car dealer, gave us a ride home after Glee Club one day in a Packard convertible the color of heavy cream with caramel leather seats. It was spring and anyone could see us, including my mother on her way to the second-day bread store. We thought it odd that Mr. Garafano complimented Mary Elizabeth (he called her "Red") on her height when I was three inches taller, and though she never took a ride again he was not discouraged: when we came around his corner on the way to school Mr. Garafano lingered at the front of his lot. He was fat and forty and smelled of cigars—a big laugh—quite a different matter from the young druggist Mr. Shea, who began to pay for our sodas and give Mary Elizabeth perfume samples. He was handsome in a lanky way and kidded around with us about boys, but when summer came he spent an indecent amount of time watching out the window to see Mary Elizabeth come down the street, and he ran out and wound the awning

up and down, talking to her about serious matters: movies, dancing, love, her family, his family. When he came to the boiling point Tom Shea would ask her to come into the cool dark store where fans blew the air and the smooth marble counter took the heat out of your hands. He would fix her a cherry Coke. Such innocence is touching, but she was still a little girl and he was a man, I suppose, so one Saturday night in August we all woke up to the noise of glass breaking and found that young Shea had dropped his bottle on our front walk. My father helped him out of the barberry, and with lovesick eyes going all over Mary Elizabeth's pajamas, Tom said, "I must have lost my way."

That fall when she would have been a cheerleader and the Princess of Transylvania in *Sweethearts*, Aunt Lil came up with the money to send Mary Elizabeth away to the Sisters of Mercy. There she played field hockey and girl's basketball and went through a religious period (with the same fervor she called forth for her analysis.) It was novel for Sherry to be holy and calm, to conjure emotions from the depths of an inexperienced heart—to exist on guilt, self-abnegation, humility. The demands of the role were great; I'm glad I missed the performance. She came home at Christmas ten pounds lighter from the spiritual indulgence, more shapely than ever; she paraded all the way up the center aisle to communion in her blue serge uniform, a small black mantilla draped over her head—more enchanting than any bride in white. All our bells rang—the phone and the front door—but Mary Elizabeth turned her suitors away with a saintly sigh and the secret smile of one who has the higher calling. Then, invited to the golf club across the river she went out on New Year's Eve and danced till morning. I was waiting in the hall for her, listening for the sound of a car, but she came walking up our hill alone, and when I let her in she ran down the hall to the bathroom.

"Come in, Ag," she whispered. Under the borrowed evening wrap her dress was torn; a gardenia, crushed and brown, hung from the tattered ruffle. We spent an hour washing the mud spots out of the skirt, but the dress was ruined.

"Silly old fool!" Mary Elizabeth wailed, despairing over the limp net, "Silly old fool!"

I didn't know what to ask. "How was the party?"

"Dreamy. A big band—I got to sing two numbers in front of a real mike, and the leader said any time he needed a girl. . . . Oh, that silly old fool," she cried again, finding another rip where her heel had caught the underskirt.

"Who?"

"Dr. Morrissey." (She had gone to the golf club with young Jim Morrissey: I had watched from a dark corner in the hall when he came to the door with a corsage.)

"Well, Jimmy put rye in his ginger-ale to prove he's a man. He passed out, and his father gave me a ride home."

"How awful!" I said, not having the slightest idea what could have happened. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, sure." Mary Elizabeth laughed. "He didn't mean anything." Then she sat down on the side of the bathtub. "Oh, Ag," her voice was young and bewildered, "why does it always have to be me?" The question seemed easy enough to answer.

Back at school, she taught the can-can to the Senior Sodality, smoked in the cellar, and got herself dismissed before Easter. Aunt Lil, whose colored girl had left to have a baby, took her in for the housework and didn't allow Mary Elizabeth out of the yard. In May my father went to bed one night and never woke up. My mind was so full of him laid out in Conley's funeral parlor that I never noticed how my brother Francis was making himself useful in Aunt Lil's garden.

Francis used to wait for me after school and we'd go to visit Mary Elizabeth in her respectable prison. I sat on the slate-stone porch, which was one of the features of Lil's house and which she had learned to call a terrace. The only time Lil gave us a thought, when she was home at all and not out playing bridge, was when she stuck her head out the sun-parlor door and said, "Don't sit on that cold stone, Agnes, you'll catch cold in your bowels."

No doubt there were buds on the rambler roses—heliotropes within delicate tendrils until their time came—and surely the apple tree snowed down on us, promising so much.

more than the stunted wormy fruit it bore each fall, but I saw only the throbbing heart of red carnations (chosen because they hold up so well) trailing the golden motto "Beloved Husband" into the magnificent box in which Mr. Conley set my father stiffly to rest. In the murky funeral home, which seemed to me a vestibule of fitting horror for the grave, clots of flowers blocked my vision: gladiolas and snapdragons wired and puttied into wreaths, sweetheart roses in a baby cross—"Our Dear Father"—and bouquets big enough to open a bank. Tributes to the florist's art appeared on every page of my Gallic Wars. I wore a black skirt, and the sight of this might bring to mind, between the successive *gaucheries* of M. and Mme. Perichon on their imbecilic voyage, other arrangements for death: the hasty purchase of our mourning, the warehouse of caskets down in New Haven: a dazzling display of varnished boxes lined with velvets and silks in pale colors to compliment the morbid tones of the embalmer's palette. Then I saw again the dresses, rose and pale green like the slabs I sat on, dresses banked by the rentable palms, dresses of lace and crepe, unwearable garments of no size, slit all the way down the back to "fit" a woman wasted or bloated in death.

In my aunt's yard the sun was bright and warm. Along each side was a strip of garden neglected since the old Yankee school-teacher had sold the house to my Uncle Peter, though the tulip and daffodil bulbs still yielded up a few weak blossoms, and forgotten plants pushed up out of habit through years of dry stalks and a blanket of leaves. No one in our family had any use for gardening: they had heard enough of poor potato crops and pitiful Mayo squashes to ever want to kneel to the earth again. Indeed I heard Lil tell a neighbor that her family had been "in agriculture," as though my grandfather was a gentleman farmer, breeding fancy apples or prize cows. Childless bustling woman that she was, Aunt Lil had developed a sharp eye for clutter of any kind, and I suppose that looking out beyond the sterile tidiness of her kitchen one day she saw her back yard and thought Francis might clean it up.

Neither my brother nor Mary Elizabeth had the slightest notion of what they were about when they went out

together in that spring sunshine. One of them would rake as the other hacked at the rubble, and then they would sit together on the grass and talk till supper time. It was a slow business, clearing away the brittle stems and matted leaves, and Francis carried off the debris in a peach basket and dumped it to rot behind the garage. They scratched at the ground with metal claws, uprooting what they thought were weeds, until they drew an ugly rim of black soil around the grass and only the obvious flowers were left—naked and humiliated. Aunt Lil was pleased, for now the yard looked like one of her pantry shelves, stark and irreproachable before the world—and she believed that the world saw and cared about the state of shelves and closets and fingernails.

What's worth telling?

When they asked me, "What were you up to, Miss, that you couldn't see?" I didn't have an answer—then. There was nothing to see: on my lap a geometry book, black perimeters defining truths within range of a sophomore—each day a new proposition, another proof. The yard, inscribed around us in a black line of earth, holds the three of us, Francis and Mary Elizabeth and me, forever, the last of our childhood dumped behind the garage. We are circumscribed by one another and by the knowledge of what would become of us as sure as my father is by his damp-proof box.

"What kind of fool were you then?"—The same kind I am now. They dug in the ground; they sat on the grass. Sometimes, not often, they came to be with me on the stone porch.

Francis wore his mourning tie still and looked a likely candidate for the seminary. My mother had always wanted it for him and claimed on occasion that she had heard his call (an unnatural voice whispering from the rectory). My brother was handsome and about to graduate from high school with his clubs and teams set down next to his picture in the yearbook: History, Junior Service, French, Thespians, Glee Club, Swimming, Basketball Cross Country—and Class Secretary. It's a wonder Francis turned into such a dull man—but maybe the tribute under his name summed him up too well: he was voted "Most Affable." Active and happy—taking

showers, training his hair, studying, serving Mass—too important to mope with me and Mary Elizabeth in our projections of black lucite and smoked mirrors, marabou and Leslie Howard. It kept him busy the whole time to be the most affable Francis X. Keely.

What *did* I think then when he didn't go to graduation practice and missed the Senior Prom? Why, that his life, like mine, had stopped on the edge of our father's grave. And "that one," as my mother called Mary Elizabeth forever after, as if her name would bring the Devil back to live among us, "that one" shuffled off to Buffalo on the porch, her breasts bouncing, her red hair beating her back in a rhythm of life. She costumed herself in an old cotton dress of Aunt Lil's which she drew tight at the waist with a belt—pathetic, a ravaged heroine of post-war *Realismo* breathing desperation and desire. Well the hell with that: this was still the Depression for us and I was fifteen years old. The hell with that and other afterthoughts.

I drooped my head down between my high shoulders and sucked sadness from the air. We were studying *Hamlet* in English. It's hard to imagine a more personal reading of the play than mine.

" 'Tis not alone this inky cloak, good mother. . . ." I stalked the misty cemetery where the sod was not yet settled over my father, and appeared in a nurse's cape behind Conley's blessed candles (which were not lit until we arrived at the funeral "home"). I swept away the sickening floral arrangements—"What?" I said with a cynical laugh. "These for a man to whom you gave not the tribute of one flower while he lived." Or, switching roles, I tripped, maddened, down the altar steps in a dance modeled on Mary Elizabeth's Fred Astair number and confronted my mother and aunts in their black hats with fennel and rue tied in packets like the sachets they gave each other on birthdays. "Hey non, nonny," I sang, for I could see this much: that they were bitter women with empty complaints who at last had gained a terrible dignity in their widow's weeds and their ceremonious weeping; their fragile minds shattered, they moaned lunatic sentiments: "He went peaceful," "A beautiful death," "Never a word," "It's those behind who suffer"—and by the time it was over they came to believe that my

father was a sneaky fellow who slipped off without warning.

One Friday night the mad world became real, and like other tragic figures I was left alone: my father, my brother, my cousin Sherry, all the people I loved, had been taken from me—in the normal course of affairs, I might say, because death, shame, a boy going off to college seem like childhood diseases compared to the larger plague. It was coming to the summer of 1939. There was nothing left but report cards and the pomp of Francis' graduation ceremony—nothing but the joyless procession of hot days and wasted hours. Summer idleness had settled upon us already, and with the garden work finished we three sat on the porch every afternoon, our only project to get ten cents out of Aunt Lil for the Good Humor man. We might have been inmates of a hospital set out to get some warmth in our bones, so it was difficult to tell them why God gave me eyes.

"There's a lot went on under your nose, young lady. You just better come down to earth, Ag."

It had been a Friday; perhaps I know that only because Lil still tells the story: "It was a Friday night," she says. "I remember Mary Elizabeth wouldn't eat the had-dock. Nice filets I got to poach in milk, but she never would eat half the perfectly good food we put in front of her. . . . I did everything for that girl."

It seems Mary Elizabeth got up in the middle of the meal to make it to the movies; I know it was one of the first times she was let out of the house. I went down to church with my mother that night to pay for the Month's Mind Mass for my father—so Francis went to Poli's with Mary Elizabeth, and on Saturday morning "the whole thing was clear." I've always wondered at that phrase, because to me there's never been anything about it that wasn't muddy. Aunt Lil got up to take a seltzer because the coconut pie was a little heavy, and hearing a noise like breathing below, she went downstairs to find them "at it" on her couch. "The blouse open," she says. "I thought it was an animal, and I told her, 'you are no better than a *low* creature. . . .'" And the story goes on—Francis seduced while carrying incense up the center aisle, Sherry doing a belly dance on her mother's death

bed while Jack Hurley strums the ukulele at the foot of the Cross.

On Sunday Sherry was gone, with the mayonnaise jar full of pennies off the pantry shelf and all the money she could filch from Lil's purse. She was sixteen and they never tried to find her, never saw her again except in the newspapers, smiling over her shoulder with her rump bared. We stood in the bus station together, knocking our shins into the suitcase Lil had bought for her to go to the nuns.

"Oh Boy," she said, "I'm finally getting out of this rotten town."

"It wasn't your fault."

"Sure it was," Mary Elizabeth said looking down at her flesh as though it were separate from her, the embodiment of an impossible child. "For weeks I told old Francis to chase his tail; but it's always my fault."

I handed over her winter coat, wet from the heat of my arm, and at least five men rushed up to help with her suitcase. When she turned on the step of the bus to wave goodbye her gesture was big; her smile dramatized the moment: she was already on stage and she hadn't even left home. In her high-heeled shoes, bright with Shinola, and with a brave Carmen mouth, she was gone from us. The crowd of strange men who looked up at her seemed a chorus of male dancers, ready to follow her with whatever grace they could muster into the stinking hot recesses of the Bridgeport Bus.

The summer heat settled into the rooms of our downstairs flat, never to leave; even during thunder storms when the air blew the curtains, it never got inside to us. Days moved slowly—Francis went off to mow lawns in Lil's neighborhood and I read stacks of library books with sticky red and green covers: mysteries and novels and everything of Eugene O'Neill that was in print—and behind each uneventful day was the figure of my mother, a mound of lard melting on the kitchen stool, fingering the bankbooks until their pages were transparent with grease, tucking them in and out of their snug envelopes with a trembling that tensed us all. Where was the money to come from? It was certainly unfortunate (by this she

meant unfair) of my father—Lord have mercy on him—to die when Francis was ready to go to college.

“May he rest in peace,” she said with an unforgiving edge to her voice that echoed across town towards St. Michael’s cemetery. May he rest in peace while she goes begging to her sisters.

Nights I lay on my bed and wondered where Mary Elizabeth was now that she wasn’t sharing my room, now that I no longer listened for her admirers coming up the hill on hot nights: the shy smitten druggist, the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker ensnared with passion in the barberry.

“Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief. . . . Count your buttons, Aggie.” I could hear the promise in her voice, as if she was sitting on the other bed brushing out her hair, sparks crackling in the dark—my nightdress *tied* at the neck; I didn’t have a button to my name.

Where is she now? Where is all that spring sadness I felt in Aunt Lil’s garden? Faded at the end of summer burnt out, like my father, like the patch of grass in our yard. By now Lil’s penny jar was empty; where would the money come from? There was never any real doubt that Francis would go off to Fordham in the fall, and it seems now that other events didn’t surprise us. We stopped only for a moment (as the aunts did when that girl ran off) to cluck at the war—not at the enemy—and went on with the bedlam of our lives: years that went by like the pages of a calendar flipping by on Poli’s screen to the swelling strains of “Tipperary.”

But the days were long. “Another day, another dollar,” my mother said jauntily—she thought it was a happy phrase—and hustled me off each morning—not to school for I was sixteen and could be put on as extra help in the zipper factory, where I sat sorting government orders stamped RUSH. I had to finish paying for our happy home. I had to pay for Francis to study 16th-century logic and rhetoric with the Jesuits. I thought of Mary Elizabeth, and stole a fifty-cent piece out of my pay envelope each week and put it in a candy box, which was hers. Francis walked among the righteous. He found himself in the NROTC and at a desk and on a ship and with

a war. He was thrown against a gangway. Mamma pin a rose on me.

Something was going to happen. I felt that for a couple of years, saw the expectancy somewhere between my beak-bird nose and the slope-off of my chin—in my mouth to be exact. I thought there might be words that mattered, like the song of a Chinese maiden perhaps, stark and elliptic, or the street cry of a French whore, *symbolique* and endearing in its shrillness, but my tongue went dry, my lips cracked, and when the words came they were cheap sarcastic replies to my mother, invective without wit, without meter, without imagery. Nothing was going to happen. I had nothing to say.

At home the months went by. We were two fish in a bowl, my mother and I, drowsing in mid-water, chasing specks, suspended in liquid slime, darting at each other in pecking motions, sustaining ourselves automatically in the staleness with some low-grade will to go on for no reason. Francie wrote in navy lingo from the Good Ship Lollipop about a matey life on board a secret ocean. My mother prayed for him—a jumbledy gurgling:

“Lite uv adjuz prayfruz, lilisuv fiel prayfruz, Virgin mose pur prayfruz—prayfruz who have recoursa Thee.” She started, never to end, a series of novenas, fretted about ration books and got slipped an occasional bag of sugar by a Democratic committeeman who had always been sure of the Keelys’ vote. In the zipper factory I sorted, stapled, filed, then was put to typing routine letters for the president—Dear Major Spoolfiddle: Your contract (USQMC/100257z/42m) for 150,000 total-slide khaki tapes, as acknowledged in our letter of March 14th, etc. . . . I pasted defense stamps in books with the Minute Man on the cover, wore a snood and flappy slacks, carried spam sandwiches in a black tin box, grew nearly six feet tall, and earned a First Aid certificate by wheezing the air out of my co-workers (drowning victims), bandaging their head wounds, and cutting off their flow of blood. I ran around our block in an air-raid helmet carrying a blank piece of paper from Mr. Dunn to Mike Ford in three minutes. History made up the meaningless games I would have learned to play in any case.

It took a while to figure out: a postcard with a fat lady

in bloomers running out of a Chick-Sales. A printed caption, *Let's get to the bottom of this, cutie!*, and written on the other side: "Will be in New London with USO Sunday, Love, Sherry." Among other things I learned that day was the story of Mary Elizabeth's new name. A flamenco dancer claimed that in a spotlight her hair was the color of aged sherry—blood of his native land—and so he had named her that, Sherry, during a two-week run at a Newark nightclub. She never used her real name again. In a few years when she blithely ordered Tio Pepe at the best bars in New York, Sherry said, "He was a Frenchman—you know, *haute monde* with a title—and he insisted upon 'Chérie.' " Then she repeated something which had been said to her: "Well, it became Sherry—corrupted like everything else, I guess." But in the full sun of an April afternoon with the Thames River dazzling and the air full of music and the roaring whistling sailors, the name Sherry Henderson seemed as natural to her as Mary Agnes Keely was to me.

"How did you manage it, Ag?" she asked. "I never thought you'd be able to get away from them."

"I told them I was doing a Sunday shift at the plant."

"That's the ticket!" She sounded as if we were still in league and had escaped from the house for an afternoon show. As nearly as I can remember she never mentioned any of the family again, and when I spoke of my mother, of Francis, of Aunt Mae or Uncle Peter—as I had to since there was no one else to make up my scenes—she listened with little comment. From that day on I might have been any friend she had shared a room with in one of those many apartments. I might as well have brought her up to date on the ailments of a family she had never seen.

We sat on the grass under the criss-cross of 2 x 4's supporting the temporary stage at the submarine base in New London. There was bunting with stars and stripes tacked up around us, and the sun shone through the gaps. Near us three little dogs, two poodles and a mutt, strutted and yapped through a rehearsal of their act—sitting up, praying, playing dead and jumping through imaginary hoops—and for a minute it looked like the Hawaiian girl in hula skirts with long tangles of hair and paper hibiscus.

blossoms were going to outnumber the rhumba dancers in wedgies and fruited turbans; but then another cluster of banana heads and ruffled breasts scurried out of the barracks across the way and there were more rhumbas than hulas. We talked about the places she had been: Pensacola, Fort Benning, Camp Kilmer. You were always singing and dancing—you never knew whether there'd be a stage and a mike or whether you'd have to sing off the back of a truck.

"Geel!" I said, fascinated by the dots of flaming rouge at the inner corner of her eyes, the streaks of white grease on her eyelids, her cherry lips coated with oil, and the pink shading on the lobes of her ears. White birds fluttered in a cage, white rabbits nibbled the air, impatient for false bottoms and secret pockets—all of this, though magic to Sherry too, was yet natural. And so I felt that Sunday, with the band booming, the M.C. warming up the boys with jokes about their officers, the grey warships lolling like harmless zoo mammals, that she danced through strangeness as most of us stumble through houses we know, accepting an irrational arrangement of doors and hallways, getting on with the business of the day. The notion persisted in my head for years that she was at home in the marvels of her world; but of course there are mornings when you can't find your way down the hall to the bathroom, when passages are sealed: then midgets and amplifiers, klieg lights and diamonds in the navel are freakish distortions in a macabre scene—gothic, unmanageable, disordered.

A heavy-set man with talcum powder on his beard and a rose in the buttonhole of his uniform came over to Sherry when he had nothing else on his mind.

"How's it going, Kid?"

"Pretty good, Stu."

He wandered off in the direction of his comic cigar, and came upon us again through a slit in the bunting.

"How's it going, Kid?"

"Just fine, Stu," Sherry said with a smile. "This heat is murder on the make-up."

"Powder it down again, Kid, before you go on." Stu took her head in his manicured hands, examined her

mouth and eyes with professional interest. He flicked a swarm of gnats away with a green silk handkerchief.

"A coming talent," he said. "Remarkable girl."

At last Sherry explained, rather defensively I thought, "This is my cousin."

"Is that so?" He bit the tip of a new cigar, moistened it with a sucking of his lips and tongue and went off to see about the line of hulas filing up the steps to the whooping of sailors and the twanging undulation of guitars. The dog trainer threw bits of biscuit in the air and the poodles leapt high—one, then another, in perfect time with the little mutt in a paper ruff and clown hat popping up on the fifth beat and tumbling down in a sorry heap.

"Stu's the manager of our outfit," Sherry said. In a moment he came back.

"You've got five minutes, Baby." We stood up and shook our skirts, and I looked at my shoe while Stu fastened the hooks at the back of Sherry's dress. Then—unbelievable to me—he ran his fingers up her legs, straightening the seams of her stockings—soft fingers with clear nail polish and a chunky onyx ring.

"Don't give them any more than two numbers," he said, "I want to be in the busses by seven o'clock."

"Shiny face—I know, Honey." Sherry twisted her mouth in a grimace that recalled her answers to the nuns.

Stu—foppish, middle-aged, blatantly handling the beautiful girl—was the first of many agents, managers, patrons: Mert, Sol, Jerry, Tonkey, the Colonel. I came to take them pretty much for granted, and towards the end I always expected some stocky gent to show up when I visited Sherry in New York. The man would enter her apartment, or be in his place already, a scotch and soda in hand, wearing a blue cashmere suit, white-on-white shirt, initialed silk tie, cuff links, ring, cologne—all the appurtenances of control. Like all the rest of them, Stu took particular notice of her clothes, her hair, her figure. Like no other breed of men they were concerned with fabrics and style, and I even got used to chatting with Sol about the length of her skirts and agreeing with the Colonel that she should avoid anything but dramatic hats.

"A simple cotton is all Sherry needs," said Stu, "noth

ing fancy, a little sweetheart neck like the girl back home. That's what the boys want, see—" He spit cigar juice.

"... the girl back home!"

I took a seat out front, on the end of a bench next to a sailor with a long face the color of oatmeal and tried to imagine his girl back home. Sherry, smiling big enough for all the boys in the world, sang "Don't sit under the apple tree with anyone else but me . . ." and it didn't matter that the lyrics were supposedly sung by a man—on the battlefield, say, or in the bowels of a submarine—all that existed was the sea of male voices cheering, rising in waves to her. Sherry spread her arms wide to welcome them all—oatmeal face, baby lieutenant and weathered old commander. It didn't matter to the USO that her voice was thin, untrained and rasped on the high notes as she sang the third number.

"Stu will give me hell," she said, afterwards, blotting her tears, "but I can't help it . . . they were all so darling to me. See, Ag, here's the picture I send them for a pin-up." Mary Elizabeth in another simple cotton blown up over the knees, on a swing all twined with blossoms—apple blossoms, back yards, girl's hair massed on shoulders, fuzzed sunlight—the pay-off.

"Well, Sherry," I said, "Sherry!"

I left her at the door of a grey barracks. A man's voice called, and she hurried up the steps into her wonderland of yapping dogs, sweat, cold cream, rabbit pellets, and Stu with a bottle of Kentucky Moon come to the door to find her.

Mert said, "I see her as the exotic type, black jersey and an upswEEP."

"How's that . . . ?" I hadn't been listening. We were standing outside the theater waiting for Sherry and some of her friends to come out after a performance of *Okla-homa*. The crowd was more interesting than Mert, her agent, whom I'd been telling yes, oh fine, all evening.

"Sherry should come to the theater in a cab."

"Yes."

"... get a press agent."

"Oh fine."

"Shouldn't waste her time on some two-bit band player."

"Yes." Sherry could do worse than show up at the clubs around town with a certain star, all to be arranged by him, Mert.

"Oh fine."

"I see it this way," Mert said. "Columbia Pictures may take an interest in the girl, but I happen to know they're loaded with All-American kids . . . besides, she could get typed, bad idea at this stage in her career. As I see it, *Oklahoma* is a springboard, but she's no comic, see—a natural yes, but what she needs is to show a versatility—an exotic quality for the switch: black jersey halter, furs, upsweep."

"Fine," I said. "Fine."

"This Columbia Pictures deal could be very big." Sherry came out in a raincoat and saddle shoes, her cheeks scrubbed, her hair held back by an elastic band. This started Mert again: "If you want to stay in the chorus the rest of your life that's all right with me too, you know. I could very easily arrange for you to make the columns next week, but I mean if you go around looking like Miss Nobody. . . ."

"Jesus, I'm only going back to my place with the kids."

Mert pointed out the whole disaster with one finger brutally jabbed into my shoulder.

"That's just it, that's just the angle with this baby. She thinks she's working in Kresge's—going to have a few beers with the girls." He turned, hacked in the gutter, and one sweet act suggested another:

"Thumb your nose at Columbia Pictures, Sweetheart—it's no skin off my back."

"This is my cousin," Sherry said with exaggerated patience, "we are going to have a little fun."

"A lousy sax player," he growled.

Sherry looked fierce, as though she might strike the swaggering little man.

"Some two-bit sax player," Mert heckled, and scurried off towards war-dim Times Square: clickety click clickety—that one wore taps on his shoes.

Some two-bit sax player was Tony De Angelo, the big

handsome product of an Italian father and an Irish mother out on Staten Island—though I'm not sure how Sherry even found this out, because more than any of her show-biz friends Tony created the impression of having always lived in mid-town Manhattan. For him there was no harking back, no hatred for a crowded house with oilcloth on the table and cooking smells in your clothes. He existed now, only now, at the moment he stood before you: tall, jazzy, self-absorbed, product of the whole yearning American psyche with its Jack Armstrong heart cut out.

During the run of *Oklahoma* Sherry lived at some good addresses, old places on the West Side with doormen and mahogany elevators; and Tony always had his key. As I talked to her at three in the morning her eyes seldom left the door. Tony would be coming in half an hour—in ten minutes, in five seconds.

"Well, you know how it is with late subways if you miss one, kid. . . . Don't crump on me now, Ag"; Sherry would brighten with her stage smile. "Tony's going to be here in a minute."

So I nursed another can of beer until it was warm from my hands and flat. The girls in the show came in and gossiped for a while, timing themselves under the sun lamp. They assumed that Sherry was waiting for Tony, like a housewife with dinner on the stove. They thought it was kind of cute, and I remember one storybook blonde who was inspired to write long letters to her guy in the Marines on pages and pages of blue stationery while we waited for Tony.

"So tell me," Sherry said, and I talked. Her face was full of anxious devotion, the injured beauty of her mother, and she blinked at the closed door through which he would come.

"So tell me," she said.

I told her all the goddamn nonsense on my mind, speaking to the four walls in a drowsy monologue. I wondered if I could absent myself from the nausea of daily life, from the factory with its ever-running day—put a net on my mind so it wouldn't get caught in the gears. Then I wouldn't have to address myself to the cafeteria slop or the Red Cross collection or the damn figures on

the time sheet. They could be made natural functions of the body, and I would have control over all that was stupid and necessary.

"Why, Ag, I thought you liked your job."

"I am giving myself to eight hours a day at a zipper factory, and if you count the overtime there's nothing left but supper and a bath."

"Look, Honey, this show's been running for nearly a year, and all I know is I get on that stage every night and put out."

"But then," I said, "safety guards presume you have two arms and all your fingers to begin with. . . ."

"Ag, do you think Tony'll want coffee when he comes in?"

Those nights waiting for Tony became my favorite times. I recall them as triumphant, and if Sherry didn't understand, Jean and Jane and Dolly and Peg never got it at all: they had learned to sit and smile at oddities, and I was just another mad thing, like the bum who picked theater programs out of the gutter every night on 45th Street, the fat lady in the delicatessen who had been Miss Binghampton of 1932, and the men who spoke the gibberish of army maneuvers or Wall Street while they waited to be taken off and fondled in a taxi. I was Sherry's skinny high-toothed "little cousin" (tall as a man). Three or four times a year I made it to New York at dusk, ate my chowder at Grand Central, stood through the whole of *Oklahoma* with its bright days and blue love-song nights: good snared by evil with "adult" touches.

"Suppose a man," (I didn't mention Francis) "were to follow the expected road without any hitches, become nothing more nothing less than his training and his character dictated . . . it'd be like the life of a larva moth."

Sherry was on the floor, going through her dance exercises, stretching towards the door.

"He could be a very nice guy."

"But of course," I said, "I only talk like this while we're waiting for Tony."

"He's working a small club downtown." She arched her back, her arms working overhead in a graceful plucking—"and that's why Tony's late." She was Mary Eliza-

both justifying some shamefully cheap trinket Jack Hurley sent to our house with the postage half paid.

Tony De Angelo was worth waiting for, I suppose—and then again he wasn't worth the tip of her little finger. He let himself into the apartment whenever he pleased, and usually stopped to light a cigarette or run a comb through his hair before he gave her so much as an insolent smile. He stood before us for a moment to be admired, which wasn't hard for me after months of dough-faces at the factory. He was grand and big and stuck in your eye. Sherry feasted: his thick black hair grew in waves close to his head, except for a forelock which flopped boyishly. His face was heavy, square at the temples, square at the chin, with a frankly Italian nose, almost Roman but ever so slightly askew—busted once, a miracle considering how often Tony enraged people. His eyes—I don't think they were brown or black, but a dark color of his own—private, skimming over the objects before him (people were objects to Tony) as though nothing commanded his attention. At last he settled on Sherry, and his gaze was a benediction. There was damn little that Tony could appreciate without a sneer, but Sherry was on the list with the world's greatest trumpet player, Harry James, the big radio networks, and custom-made suits.

"Tony has bedroom eyes," a model said one night—but that was wishful thinking. He looked through your clothes all right, but it wasn't your body that interested him, it was whatever crippled thing hid inside: the nasal Brooklyn accent of an actress trying to sound like Katherine Cornell, the parrot mind of a script writer, the fear in a tough Master Sergeant. I was not a member of their beautiful-bodies club and when Tony De Angelo looked at me I like to think I puzzled him. There was no deception in my hungry adolescent form: I was the cynical clown, the sensitive spinster, the hell-of-a-good kid.

"Mary Agnes, how's the girl?"—His words sounded like a joke, and I can imagine him thinking:

"You have no secrets, do you, Sweetheart? You plan to make that a way of life."

If Sherry made coffee Tony would say, "Not right now.

I'll have that Canadian Club." And when she poured him the best liquor she could buy, he flicked it away.

"What have you got in the house? Fruit? Maybe I'll have some scrambled eggs to start."

Then she watched him eat, and asked (as if the management had sent her), "Is everything OK?"

"Great," Tony said, but in some small way—his finger tapping on the burnt edge of toast, his fork held to let the egg dribble through the tines—he let her know how hopeless she was as the Little Woman.

I never set eyes on Tony De Angelo before three o'clock in the morning, and he was always perfectly dressed, often in a tuxedo with wide glossy lapels, so if he hadn't come in with his bulbous sax case he might have been arriving from one of those prewar parties I had seen in the movies, with frozen-faced extras foxtrotting around the pillars. I was to understand, and so were the kids who lived with Sherry—she told us with misty eyes—that Tony "could not fight for his country." They wouldn't even have him in the U.S. Marine Corps band. There was something damaged (a vague internal organ which she described on different occasions as the kidney, the liver, the pancreas)—just something that made him unfit.

It was true: there were many sad stories during the war, but when I think of it now I can't imagine that Tony De Angelo would have been any less bitter if he had sweated out his days in glory on a Pacific island. Sherry and her friends had big enough hearts to accept his tragedy, and so that covered the situation nicely. Injustice for Tony was so much bigger than a lousy medical fact—it was the whole deal that brought him into the world in a four-family house on Staten Island, that gave him a musical facility but no original talent, that made him expect because he was one gorgeous kid he could have something besides hard luck—and by the time Sherry met him he was not even angry, just using one set-up after another for whatever it was worth: a drink, a few dollars, a woman.

Maybe his style was unfamiliar then: we were involved in a spiritual renaissance, and we hoped, we cared, while Tony, convinced of personal destruction, played his own game. He was a prophet: youth turned silent, moody and

selfish—sick because it knows that nobody wins. What mattered to Tony was lonely nervous grace—his nighttime body beating to the rhythm of the band, shut off from the dancers, finding its momentary salvation in a note that came off—as good as sex. Once at the Palladium I saw him in his ecstasy—but only once, because Sherry did not like to watch him play. If Tony were around now, exactly as he was twenty years ago, he would be a cliché—but then, ah then, he was a remarkable bastard.

“A terrible bastard,” Little Dot said in her ladylike drawl, “. . . and Sherry could have a lead in the road show, but she’s sitting around for him . . . it’s one hand-out after another.” Little Dot was wiry and resilient, the only one of Sherry’s friends who ever made a name for herself. She had worked hard training a sweet lyric soprano voice for years, and when her first big chance came on the Major Bowes Amateur Hour she lost to a quadruple amputee who played (with his teeth) “God Bless America” on nails stuck into a cigarette carton.

“You wouldn’t catch me jumpin’ through a hoop for that bastard.”

Little Dot went right on with her scales. I took up going to night school to learn whatever useless pleasantries existed in poems and stories—to learn something apart from the zippers which evolved each year like a Darwinian species: grew longer, smarter, more durable, only to be killed off by superior models with better teeth, more adaptable bindings. My mother, praying for Francis, who was in Washington and later got that piece of gangway in the thigh, was inspired to return to the arts. She created a cake made without butter or sugar and only one egg. It stuck like paste on the teeth. She made a display of weeny figures for her Civil Defense class with peanut shells for bodies and pipe cleaners for limbs, and set them in cigar boxes: peanuts straddled peanuts, performing (one hoped) artificial respiration; healthy peanuts carried sick peanuts on a snip of old blanket; there were peanuts in tourniquets and arm slings, peanuts with concussions and complex fractures, and one old peanut (modeled after the bedridden ancient of our block) being evacuated in an Indian handclasp seat by two sturdy pea-

nut wardens to the cellar of the Congregational Church. Sherry continued her chorus-girl role in *Oklahoma*.

Sherry Henderson's career was a child's dream—that was the maimed thing Tony De Angelo saw. There were at least three screen tests maneuvered for her by a bull-neck named Jerry, and she was content to come back from the Coast and pretend she was interested in her future; but she would have chucked the whole business in one minute if Tony had agreed to teach music and dance with her—which was, of course, Sherry's idea. We were hiding the liquor in the bottom of a closet, because of his kidney or liver or pancreas, and I was delivering a facetious sermon to myself on the advantage of developing my given peculiarities—no chest, long nose, sunken eyes—into full-fledged eccentricities.

"Do something with what God gives you," I said, "for his mercy is unbounded. We have only to look around us to discover there is a Great Intelligence behind the intricate patterns of the Universe, and it is our duty to discover further the purpose for which the Good Lord put us here . . . for He moves in strange and mysterious ways."

"Put that pint in the shoe box, Ag."

"It is our duty to discover ourselves as part of the Divine System, for surely with this body I am meant to carry a burden on my back, and these eyes must see deep into the machinery of souls—yes, even into my own faltering soul; and the nose . . . the nose must smell out corruption and decay. . . ."

"Oh, stop it," Sherry cried. Her hair was all crazy from stooping in the closet. "You're always laughing lately, never serious for a moment. We do what we must. We do what we can. I could give tap lessons, you know, and teach ballroom dancing. Tony could teach the sax and probably the accordion if he would only settle down."

"You must be kidding," I said.

"Yes." Big tears washed the mascara down her cheeks. This was wilder than any of the mad schemes for fame and fortune she ever had back home. She actually conceived of rented rooms up over a drugstore in some sizable outpost, "The De Angelo's" painted on the window and rows of kiddy legs wriggling around on highly pol-

ished floors—"With my foot I tap, tap, tap, with my hands I clap, clap, clap"—while Tony listened to farts exploded out of a cheap instrument by an unwilling boy. I saw the curtain of faded chintz that separated the "studio" from the little room with the sink and hot plate. I saw Tony and Sherry (thought to be a little on the flashy side) grown to forty, still holding tight to a New York concept of themselves, eating out in bad restaurants, playing the accordion and singing at weddings in the BPOE Hall.

Tony came in and said, "How about a drink?"

"I don't have a thing in the house."

"Look around, Baby . . ." and she went directly to the closet and brought out the bottle.

So the next time I came to New York Tony was unable to work, though he still came in at four o'clock in his tux. Sherry had set him to songwriting, where the real money was. On top of a Steinway she had rented for him there were three songs pencilled out—notes, lyrics, titles and all—"Why so Bitter My Sweet?", "When Bonnie Comes Marching Home" (about a WAC who left her love behind), and "Love Letters in the Sky" (a pilot who is afraid to declare his feelings except when he is gunning Japs in a B-47). Tony's socks and underwear were all over the bedroom, his razor on the sink, and he slept in the bed where I had last seen Little Dot propped up with pillows memorizing the score of *Così fan Tutte*. I can't say that I was shocked, for I don't suppose that even I thought they had been playing post-office all this time. That night Tony was snarly, got drunk, passed out on the living-room floor, and we had to drag him to bed. Sherry loosened his shirt collar, took off his shoes, and smoothed that wild forelock back out of his eyes with hands that had once been soft.

"Poor Tony . . ." she said looking at me, and we both knew that things weren't going to improve.

When he left her she went on the road with a second company of the show, singing those bright songs all over the country, dancing and whooping, shouting out about the beautiful morning. She made a movie which I saw eight times. When Dane Clark entered a small night club she said "Good Evening," and tried to check his hat.

"Where the boss?" Dane asked.

"Over at the bar," Sherry answered. Later she screamed when the shots went off, an unconvincing shriek, and she wouldn't answer the hard old detective.

"I only work here, Mister."—Sherry was never good at repartee. Her features, blown up on the screen, were not the common doll-face the role called for: her high cheek bones and cleft chin were too powerful facing the perceptive camera: she looked as if she had wandered into this contrived piece out of a drama on the Irish Revolution—moving close-ups of faces with "character," damp, darkness and meaningful death.

My mother and the aunts weren't much for movies, and I never let on that Mary Elizabeth could be seen down at Poli's because I knew that all they'd go for was the net stockings, the cleavage, the "low types" wished into existence by their literal minds. I cut my class in "Great Thinkers of the Western World" to study what I saw in Sherry's eyes—the crease of doubt forming on her brow, the air of acceptance in the droop of her bare shoulders. Though she was only twenty-three she had gone through one life already. I could see that, and I walked out of the theater while Dane Clark was still dying, while the lights were still on in the night classes at the high-school, illuminating the sophistries of Mr. Ruggiero and Miss Flynn as they argued free-will and determinism. The two-bit sax player was gone forever, and I hated him for the years he had taken from Sherry. Later, during her "mature" phase, she told me he had married a neighborhood girl out on Staten Island and had two kids and worked in a shoe store.

Sol was a loud-mouth puffed eunuch who had great success in shaping the careers of female comics, and he was sure that what Sherry had was a flair for dancing a kind of rag-doll in a Baby-Snooks routine he had devised, the surprise being that when she pulled off the Harpo Marx wig and the Harold Lloyd glasses there was a real pretty girl who sang a couple of sweet ballads. It was blistering hot the night Sol and Sherry and I went down to the Village to show the act to a very big man who was

opening a new club. Sol advised Sherry on her costume in a lilting falsetto.

"The simple backless number, Dear . . . no jewels . . . ruins your neck," and he pursed his lips in disgust at me, done up in my best Bemberg sheer:

"Why don't you go to a newsreel?"

But I went along, paid the cab driver, and watched from a leopard-skin booth while Sol and Sherry dealt with the very big man. The club was to be a jungle with a lot of African masks, bamboo tables that caught the stockings, and a ceiling weighted with oppressive greenery. A pair of caged monkeys chattered over the bar.

"Zow, *some* people!" Sherry cried out in an effeminate voice, an imitation of *Maitre* Sol. She slid onto the dance floor as if kicked in the seat of the pants and attempted to get up on rubber legs; she pulled a great big Times Square funny comb from noplac and further mucked up her blonde wig.

"I'm gonna sing a little song," she said with a croak in her throat.

"Why don't you Voo-Do-Do what you did did did before. . . ."

I walked out to the street where a gang of little children in filthy underpants were working to unscrew a fire hydrant. I thought I could watch anything as long as it wasn't Sherry clowning in the veldt, but the sight of the screaming kids—sweaty, no doubt tired, for it was past ten—nauseated me and brought to mind the six grey molluscs (the color of their dirty hands) I had swallowed whole at the Oyster Bar. Sad they seemed, those oysters, exposed on their icy bed and wanting nothing more than to contract into the known darkness. Slowly I went to the hydrant and we pulled together: the straining little fingers and my own scrawny hands; we pulled in a hush of effort until the geyser shot into the sleepless night-city. Squealing with relief the children performed a frantic dance; shiny bare limbs, freshened, made clean.

The audition—that's what they called it——was over when I went back. Sol and the very big man sat on rattan stools at the bar celebrating their mutual distrust. They toasted Sherry with Cuba Libres. I watched from behind the glistening leaves of a paper tree.

"I'm glad you like the act," Sherry said—that good face full of hope once more.

"We'll talk about the act, Honey," the big man reassured her with several pats on the fleshy part of her back.

"Oooo, you naughty boys," Sol chided the monkeys who were very busy in their cage; and then they saw me in the mirror, my dress shrunk up over my knees, my hair soaked into kinks, an untamed freak of nature after a tropical storm.

After the war there were two musicals; one closed in Boston, the other petered out in the City before I got to see her. Then Sherry sang, restrained, intimate, in supper clubs—which was less embarrassing than most of her ventures—and it was in this role of sophisticated *chanteuse* that the Colonel discovered her. Beneath the showbiz patina and the undercoat of spoiled innocence he detected the expansive, natural girl. The Colonel had wives; oh yes, but no woman challenged him like Mary Elizabeth. That was his trade: he had rebuilt a European city from the ruins of war and occupation, restored its dignity with a fine respect for history, set it to live and grow once again. Now he was revitalizing a great newspaper that was sick unto death. He was rich and bright and powerful.

The marriage came as a surprise, a telegram I found opened on the hall table when I returned from work one day. My mother's voice called out to me with a tremble of excitement:

"Ag—Ag, is that you?" She was on the phone, and it must have been a difficult moment for her, not knowing whether to continue her damnation of Mary Elizabeth—satisfying in the mouth like chocolate creams—or to come hustling through the dining-room to exact testimony from me of her depravity. The verdict she had already reached.

"Don't you tell me you never saw the man on one of your sneaky 'visits,' Ag Keely."

"I never even has heard of him," I said in my grandmother's jibing brogue.

"Throw insults on the grave—that's good, Miss."

"I don't know who he is."

My mother plumped herself out like a proud fat pigeon. "That name," she said with malicious pleasure—"He's a Jew!"

The Colonel was a Jew, but all that was left was a story now and again with a Yiddish expression and a dreamy painting by Chagall hanging in the dining-room over a fine carved cabinet (which I was expected to admire).

Was Sherry Catholic any more? The question was irrelevant. Her new mode was ultimately enlightened, free of the limitations of any simple identity. The first time I saw Sherry and Colonel Leavit together I tried to understand the cosmopolitan perfection he aimed at, but in minutes my head was fuzzed by martinis and I felt the three of us floating in a soft white room to a melody plucked from a fragile box.

He was fifty, Colonel Harry, Daddy of All the Ages; he wanted the best for his little orphan girl (even *that* was in a literary tradition), and he never failed to have something in his pocket for me too—the rag-picker cousin.

"We can't use our tickets to the Philharmonic, Mary Agnes," he'd tell me. "I want you to come down here and enjoy yourself. Bring a friend."

"Oh, Harry, she can't just hop a train," Sherry said.

She was right. Still the offer was like a crisp five dollar bill.

He was fifty. That didn't seem old: it seemed right. His head was a phrenologist's dream, bare and gleaming, with bumps that I read—without even knowing the science—as intelligence, creativity, success. And since he had no hair, one looked hard at his face: lean, composed, a model of a commander whose kindly eyes made the people around him want to perform in style. His whole body was lean, and I never knew until Sherry told me—oh much later—that he worked out at a gym every day.

I don't know why I found that disappointing; he worked damn hard at the "image" of himself, as hard as he now worked on the ailing newspaper or had worked over the demolished city. Those quiet evenings I was invited to share—they were carefully conceived. His scheme for Sherry was delicate, but its process was superhuman, and of all his plans the only one she took to was

the study of music: she learned to play the harpsichord.

"Tasteful beginners' pieces," he said, ". . . nicely done all the same." He knew her voice was good only for a few songs after dinner, so we listened to her in a white drawing-room sing sad short *lieder* in memorized German. To me it was all strange and perfect, and like the thick herbaceous liqueur I rolled on my tongue I believed in it, but surely the Colonel knew that their life came out of bad historical novels.

"Tomorrow let us ride over to the Manor House in the pony cart."

"Oh yes, that will be gay," Miss Agnes said, letting drop her needlework that she might dream awhile of her new bonnet, looking very pretty indeed in the orangery.

Gold flowers blooming in gold pots, Sherry in a green velvet gown, covering her arms to the wrists, open at the throat. Her look says, "Ain't it the berries, Ag!" And the Colonel, in a smoking jacket, talks of pleasure: *his*—having me with them—"one of the people Sherry loves."

Other treasures: a frieze of saints given by a grateful city—part of itself—to take away with him; the edition of *Parnasse contemporain* bound in pearly leather—"of particular interest to you. . . ." The wine I couldn't possibly know . . . everything real in the way heaven must be softly lit, with one all-caring God.

Their bed (I see it when led off to wash the Châteaufort Rothschild out of my sweater) is big enough for an army of lovers, high up on a dais—a throne yes, but to me more like the altar in my parish church, its canopy hung with starched lace, thick embroidered initials all the way spread: His and Hers intertwined, scrambled. I see LHS: Harry, Sherry, Leavit, the bottom nodule of the "L" strangely shortened for the sake of the design. "God who giveth joy to my life." Maybe it was the ascending those green (for hope) carpeted steps onto the consecrated kingsize mattress—was that what became impossible?

At the table Sherry, now learned in sauces and salads, had to be followed closely as to which fork—and the peculiar small knife for a russet pear with the leaves on, or a platinum-blond apple; and grapes (Lord, they must be fake), frosty, purply. But no!—she cuts the

apart with a scissors! The salt sits in open silver shells with midget spoons, and the coffee cups are doll-size.

Sherry *tried* with all that food and wine business, but she never could make herself eat the special smelly cheeses—or brains or kidneys or sweetbreads. I could tell just the way she ate—not seeing the elaborate entrees the Colonel ordered—veal and chicken and tongue: larded, farced, and truffled in glossy gelatine—that she might as well be eating Mae's overcooked meat loaf swimming in canned tomatoes. She hid peanut butter in a jar labeled Queen Bee Hormone Jelly, and Ritz crackers under her lingerie.

"It's a terrible sign of a regression, Ag. . . ." The Colonel had sent her to a Park Avenue psychiatrist so she'd know all about herself—as well as George III tea pots and pre-Colombian sculpture. She wasn't always happy—Colonel Harry knew that, admired it even—and no doubt he expected the analysis to tap a vein of hidden meanings and obscure desires in his beautiful girl. But Sherry was still a "C" student: she took to the idea in her own way, began to read inspirational literature, do-it-yourself salvation kits. Harry was infuriated; he had given her Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

He staged a quiet evening of Camus—I was included—and she bubbled over about "inner resources" and "building towards personal maturity."

"I'm going to send you this book, Mary Agnes, by this woman . . ."

"Now my Darling," the Colonel said; "Mary Agnes knows she can charge any book she wants on my account at Brentano's."

"Yes, Harry . . . By this woman, Ag, this wonderful woman whose child died of leukemia."

Her recommended readings arrived at our house, and I found the books opened on the hall table—the Overstreets and Norman Vincent Peale—and I heard my mother behind her evening paper.

"Protestant . . ." and, making what was to her a logical connection, "Jew." I put the books, which seemed sticky with childish optimism, under my bed; my mother never dusted there because her heart started racing. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph . . . no one to help an old woman."

At night after I had escaped into my homework from the endless days of my life at the zipper factory, I fell asleep under my student lamp and I heard Sherry call from her stack of goodness-readings under the bed (where as a girl she used to hide her contraband movie magazines):

"Say, Mr. and Mrs. North are over at the Rialto, Ag— Let's go; I'll get twenty cents easy if I sing down at the firehouse."

". . . just because a person has been disturbed by a difficult family situation doesn't mean that they have to react to a relationship without commitment. . . ." Sherry was on her favorite theme, and I could see the Colonel's disappointment as he suffered the obvious phrases she had picked up on the couch. He was bewildered by defeat.

"Well, what did you expect," I thought; "there's nothing in my cousin for a doctor to heal. Sherry is all surface. That's what's great about her: if she's sad, there are tears, a black mood that clears at the first dose of peanut butter. And she is happy every time she puts on that black mink coat you gave her. You know the smile."

We were both wrong: the Colonel for wanting her complex, and I was a fool to think that she was simple.

For five years I journeyed to the City when I could get loose, partook of their hospitable dream, became one of the mottled images reflected in that ancient mirror which Colonel Leavit hung at the end of his palatial salons. Thirty, I was thirty years old (which would have made her thirty-one), and by then the Colonel had built up several anemic industries. Projecting into the future, he saw the growth-potential in fiberglass, in pre-fab houses, in tranquilizers, in television; and he began to take a leading painter—Bryn Mawr and boring to Sherry—out to fashionable restaurants while his wife went to bed with headache. He escorted Little Dot to the opening night of the Metropolitan Opera. And then, when he flew out to the Coast to buy old Academy Award pictures, Sherry produced the grand finale.

"What will I say to Harry?" she asked, and turned the question into a tipsy song, "What'll I tell Harry, Harry . . ." She stumbled through forgotten dance routines.

"Nothing, I guess."

She wouldn't have to say a thing: all the kids were there, even Little Dot, who didn't stay long because she was much too fine for them now, but all the lamp-tanned chorus girls and all the dainty men who had not aged a minute, and Sol and Jerry and some of the way-back USO girls who were married now and brought their husbands in from the suburbs for free eats, and lots of people no one had ever seen before. Sandwiches ground into the Aubusson carpets, club soda spilled into the harpsichord, and all those wines were pulled out of the carved cabinet from their tilted mellowing sleep and drunk like gallons of *paesano*. On one side of the bed there was a blind man who played the electric organ in nightclubs. He sat up stiffly, laughing and drinking, his white cane stuck through the lace. Someone had tied a brassiere on his head, and behind him on a pile of coats a girl was cruelly used. I didn't want to see more, so I left my good coat and walked out in the rain.

How did Sherry look: desiccated, hard, a hearty bitch? Not at all, She looked frail from the trying years of a fraudulent marriage, stretched in the neck and arms, bones and veins without much flesh, but with hair the color of red maples, and her song, "Tell Harry, Harry . . ." was gay.

She had walked out, way beyond his control, away from the elaborate parlor game he had made into the good life. The act was over for me too, and I regretted that mutation of reality which had made our evenings together a *séance*—on my part a dabbling in the mysterious and occult. For a while there had been no factory, no zippers, no dinners at Sticky-bun Inn where you presented Therese Selinski with an orchid corsage and a Mirro-Matic Pressure Cooker and wishes for many sunny days of married life. With no mother, no Lil, no Mae with a breast removed; without them you are sinking into the white softness, your body suspended in a million goose feathers sewn in sacks of sky blue silk. Think now of what you learn and what you read: Blake in night school, Villon in translation. You will speak through them to us, misty-footed angel: in your mouth are the phonemes of a strange mellifluous language. You will

transform the ugliness of our landscape; you will tell us what it means. . . . Speak, monkey, speak—and I moaned from my horrifying past.

"My name is Bridie Murphy." It ended so. No more artichokes, no more golden apples; only the reality of Florence Flynn and Mr. Ruggiero—my intellectual milieu—squabbling in the high school, this time about D. H. Lawrence in Modern British "Lit."

"One individual has a responsibility not to destroy the core of another individual," Sherry explained after the divorce. "Harry wanted me to look his way, act his way but he didn't care anything about me inside."

"No," I said. We were having lunch at Stouffer's on Fifth Avenue after my morning with Shakespeare at Columbia. I had the distinct impression that all around us the ladies were talking about their lives in this way, or about their clothes—as important as their lives.

"He never understood that he must respect me as a person." She wore a floppy brown hat that covered up her hair, and the mink coat was thrown over the back of her chair. I had not seen her out in the daylight in many years and on the avenue the winter sun had caught every line. The girl that Colonel Leavit had preserved in candlelight was gone. Sherry could have been any faded beauty; the spectacle was over.

"Yes," I said.

"I feel I can breathe again, Ag, and dance. Listen, I have this wonderful voice coach, a sweetheart who says he can get me right back to work—not that I have to, but it's my old compulsion—Harry never touched it—of having to give myself. . . ."

"Yes," I said. We must have looked a sight, munched over a parfait, skinny and dry, probably in one of those sexy knit suits I wore to fool the public, and Sherry wiping the floor with mink, wearing the biggest diamond in the world—third finger right hand.

"The Colonel never had friends. They were always business connections pretending to be buddies. It wasn't all Boccherini and Belgian endive, I'll tell you, Ag."

"Gosh!"

Her new apartment was in a shining glass building on Sutton Place, as friendly as a hospital, with the instr

ments for living laid out about the white walls: plastic wood tables at the end of the couch, a deep Naugahyde chair with a stand big enough for an ashtray and a drink. Here the portly men sat with their scotch-and-sodas, bourbons-on-the-rocks, gin-and-bitters. They were all "sweethearts," "real cuties" who wanted to help a girl out. She went to Acapulco for rest and sunshine with an advertising man who put her in a detergent commercial.

I left my books to watch my mother as she watched Sherry (she never recognized her) as a worried housewife in a laundromat, a pleasant woman aging fast with the problems of sink stain and bathroom odor. Soil and deep-down grime drove her nearly to tears.

"I just can't seem to get things *clean* any more." Then up came a snappy dish with a pile of whiter-than-white towels and laughed right in Sherry's face.

"Why don't you use the new miracle tablet, a combination of gentle bleach and powder-plus detergents that makes laundry day the happiest day in the week."

"A tablet? Not on *these* filthy collars!" Sherry held up a shirt ringed with greasy body dirt.

My mother heaved herself out of her chair and hurried to the kitchen. Now that she had grown so *very* big her walk was labored and she put out her hand for support, first on the back of a dining-room chair and then on the buffet.

"Want anything, Ag?"

How delighted Mary Elizabeth looked, and she chuckled with Mrs. Goody-Two Shoes, right there in our front room with the filet curtains and the furniture, the same as when she left.

"I guess my troubles are over," Sherry said, but she was a bad actress and the line didn't ring true. I felt when she left the laundromat she was doomed to droopy tresses or nasal congestion; and what's more she knew it.

Mother was having a run on jelly doughnuts in the months Sherry's commercial was shown and she would come back with two soft clumps oozing scarlet tapioca jelly.

"Have one, Ag."

"I couldn't."

"Aren't you going to hear the weather?" she asked as I

went back to my studies. "Well, I'm sure I'm privileged to have got a look at you at all."

I wasn't a girl any more and night-time visits to New York had lost their charm. After a few expense-account dinners with Sherry and one of her "sweethearts" I gave it up. Should I say I gave her up? Anything I had to say to her would sound preachy, the envious moralizing of an old maid, and why should I accuse her when she could still riffle through the bottom drawer of used emotions and come up with that best of smiles meaning jolly days, tomorrow, just around the corner. Her personal psychology was as out of date as the Depression song she used to sing about a pocket full of dreams. The world had changed on her. There was an insatiable lust for things: great-assed cars, freezing chests like coffins, magic boxes; love-play in the supermarket, sexual poking at sealed meats and cake mixes, the thrill of climax as the register rings—the check-out counter. She didn't know what was happening, and I closed my door, unable and unwilling to cope with her life or mine. I had something of a problem at this time: Jim Neary, son of one of my mother's cronies, went so far as to declare an interest in stumping into the future with me. He had a limp and taught the fifth grade. He gave me a bottle of Blue Grass Cologne and a little collie dog, but that is another story of misplaced trust and self-destruction, a melodrama starring my brother Francis (now an FBI agent) and my mother who breaks her hip in a cemetery outside of Buffalo.

To be honest, I had not talked to Sherry in years. Waiting for Tony I had talked *at* her; I had talked *around* her with the Colonel, but all I had said directly to my cousin was "Gee Whiz!"—a line straight out of the funny papers delivered with a look of bug-eyed amazement long after she ceased to amaze. I discovered more of the City in daylight after my Saturday-morning class at Columbia than I had in all the years of her nightlife, which now seemed trite for both of us. I'm sure it was as hard for Sherry to go on with the show—pulling out new wonders for the relative from out-of-town—as it was for me to come on all incredulous at out-sized menus and happy-pills. What she had in mind now that she was free was a come-back, this time off-Broadway, the real thea-

ter—Art. The last time I saw her she was sitting on the floor surrounded by piles of new paperbacks: Brecht, Ionesco, Genet, and the plays of Yeats. The man in the Naugahyde chair (Scotch Mannattans and ladies' sportswear) smirked indulgently, said his daughter was interested in all that up at Sarah Lawrence. I said I had to get my train, but Sherry with her brand new smile asked, "What do you think, Ag? Now that I won't have to play the *ingenue*?"

Almost a year later the Christmas card came with a drawing of a parrot in a golden cage. "Season's Greetings from Sherry Leavit and Jamie."

Since I never envisioned her cleaning a cage and setting out parrot food, I presumed there was a new "sweetheart" in her life—until she telephoned late one January night.

"Glory be to God!" My mother held her hand where she imagined her heart was. "I thought it was something wrong with Francis or one of the children."

"Wonderful," I said.

"This is the break I've been waiting for." Sherry used the same old words the same old way. "You'll see it in the papers, but the show isn't announced yet. It's got everyone: Merman, Leonard Bernstein."

"Gee!"

"It's tremendous, exciting. Listen to Jamie. Listen to beautiful Baby; he was so happy for me I cried; honest, he *knows* that something great has happened. Listen to Jamie." I listened to Jamie's guttural squawks, which grew louder and soared to a piercing crescendo.

"Are you going to sing?" I asked, turning my back on my bird of prey, who was pretending to watch the Late Show. There was a flapping and scratching at the other end.

"It's not quite set, Ag. *The Gershwin Years* is a whole ninety minutes, a spectacular, and of course they need lots of kids."

"Wonderful!"

"He's right here on my shoulder, my baby Jamie."

She had given her heart for the last time.

"Lord forgive me," mother said, "I thought it was Francis."

Sherry was right, I couldn't have missed *The Gershwin Years*, one of those cultural gestures on behalf of the network and a paternalistic oil company. I didn't say a word at home and—small wonder—my mother went over to Mae's, lured by fudgy brownies. Alone in the darkness I waited for Sherry; girls swayed and sang, girls with giant Ziegfeld plumes wafted down the glittering stairs of our M-G-M dreams; girls drifted through arty mobiles in leotards. They were all young—Sherry fifteen years ago—with painted inexpressive faces and elastic bodies—a lifetime removed from the beautiful woman with a past, weighted with mink and diamonds in Stouffer's, picking her way through the days with a man or a parrot or another hope.

"George Gershwin came up from the lower East Side, from a confining study of the classics to the restless jazzy world of discordant newness. . . ." It went on like that, a man's voice giving me all this about the American dream, the search, fulfillment; but the first half hour was over and I had not seen Sherry. Then the scenes from *Porgy and Bess*—nothing doing there, unless they put her in black face. I looked at the screen so damn hard—more young girls swooping about the Eiffel Tower. I thought I had missed her, perhaps unrecognizable behind a feathery fan, disguised by a boa—and then I thought, my God, she never made it—all these kids jumping around and Sherry out of the business for so many years.

Ten minutes left, and my solemn commentator grew more lugubrious as he spoke again of Paris in the twenties: Gershwin had wanted much more than success . . . OK, OK, yes, Fitzgerald, Picasso, Hemingway, Joyce, and as our own greatest spokesman for the expatriates, Gertrude Stein, said: "Everybody was twenty-six. Hemingway was twenty-six. I was twenty-six. The world was twenty-six." It was Mary Elizabeth reading the words out in a high faltering voice, toneless, uncomprehending. It was so bad, but I counted on Sherry not knowing.

Come to think of it, I counted on a lot: on an unbroken line that I followed, like a child's puzzle in which you draw your pencil from 1 to 2 to 3, through a maze of numbers and come out with the not so very hidden picture of our pig-eyed house snuggled in nightmare juxtapo-

sition up to the zipper factory—mother supporting the whole teetering works, old Atlas of the daily continuum. I counted on some freshly shaven gent with a Sulka tie to tell Sherry how talented she was, though maybe her style was more in the Arlene Francis line: wit and chiffon. I counted on getting up and going to work and coming home to Henry James. I counted on Sherry slipping into her mink coat and eating a peanut butter sandwich. I counted on the only death being inside me, an increasing numbness of some mysterious vital organ, like Tony De Angelo's kidney or liver or pancreas. But Sherry didn't even bother to switch off the set. She went straight to the medicine cabinet of her luxury bathroom, and when the woman who ran the vacuum over the wall-to-wall carpet came in she found the daytime *Price Is Right* blaring and thought that strange because usually if Mrs. Leavit was up she liked the old movies.

They notified the Colonel, who was in Washington about a contract for nose cones, and by the time her show-biz friends remembered my name she was buried in a non-sectarian cemetery on Long Island. A man I'd never heard of called me at the office and I took the next bus to Bridgeport and changed to a mid-morning train to New York—though I can't think why. When the superintendent let me into Sherry's apartment he drew back the curtains, and there was the bright spring East River, sunlight on the water, green branches along the embankment. A toy tug fitted out with little men hauled a flat black freighter out to the sea—gay flags, a pretty world from this height, like the magic blackness embroidered with stars and strings of electric lights which had been Sherry's.

In a while the Colonel came with Little Dot. She was anxious about a rehearsal of *Traviata* at City Center.

"Harry dear," she said, "perhaps Miss Keely would like something of Sherry's." They offered a brooch I had never seen her wear, but then there were demanding screams from the bedroom, and we ran in to find Jamie—yellow and red and green with glassy eyes. He was in a flap and repeated again and again words we had not been trained to understand. Little Dot, always the prima donna, glanced at her watch.

"We called the ASPCA and I thought somehow that we should be here. Harry or someone. . . ." Then she looked at me with a wan smile, perfect for the last act, the final brave aria.

"Would you like him? Would you like the bird?"

I said I found him disgusting. Colonel Leavit, full of understanding, brought me out to the living room again. He picked up his topcoat of some rich wonderful material, and said by way of consolation, "She was beautiful, beautiful."

"Yes."

We looked around at her plain room before we left, for Little Dot had decided that, after all, the doorman could deal with the parrot.

"Terrible place," the Colonel said, "no character."

I telephoned Francis from Grand Central, and as soon as I heard his voice I knew I would not have to tell him about Mary Elizabeth. He had read it in the paper.

"Don't say anything to them at home—please Francis, that's just what they'd like."

He said yes, and then asked, "Tell me Ag, was there time—did she have a priest?"

A Family Man

Donald Hutter

SPARLING sat at his desk in the main office of the international bank he had been with for seven years and sipped his third coffee of the morning. There were two other desks in the room, both vacant at the moment but both ready to serve any other returning overseas branch officer. The room, numbered 703, was in fact a kind of pipeline depot. That Sparling had been in it for almost four months, longer than was the rule for overseas personnel awaiting reassignment, was due to a personal crisis rather than any review of his professional performance. The bank liked the job Sparling had done for them in Honduras, but Sparling was being divorced, and until that was settled there was nothing for him to do but wait in Room 703.

He had taken the desk a week before, following the departure of the last other man to share the room with him. It was the nearest desk to the window, and from it Sparling could look down into the building's plaza, a generous cavity in the architect's ground plan, where at lunch hour clerical employees gathered and idled under a sun tunneling down to them past fifty-four floors of glass and sectional steel.

The only piece of paper on Sparling's desk was a list of names and telephone numbers, a list unconcerned with banking. Each name had been checked off and a dollar amount or, in two cases, a dash penciled beside it, with the exception of the last: Wexler, Louis.

Sparling drank the rest of his coffee, lit a cigarette and picked up the phone.

"Yes?" asked a girl's voice.

"This is the last one, Elaine, honest," he said, and gave her the number.

He sat back, drawing on his cigarette while the relays clicked.

"Raleigh Mills, good morning."

"Hello. I'd like to speak to Mr. Wexler, please. Mr. Louis Wexler."

More clicking, then a third voice sounding no different from the first two (raising a bizarre vision—the one and only all-American switchboard operator faking the whole routine from a single huge board): "Mr. Wexler's office."

"Is Mr. Wexler in? This is Avery Sparling calling."

"Let me see," and a moment later, "Go ahead, please."

"Hello?"

"Louie, this is Ave Sparling, from St. Andy's. How are you?"

"Ave, for Pete's sake! I'm fine. She said Avery Sparling and I thought it was some eager-beaver insurance man working a list. It just didn't connect. How are you? Or wait a minute, maybe you *are* selling insurance."

"No," said Sparling with a slight laugh. "I'm with the United Trust. But you weren't too far wrong. I am after your money."

"So it's come to that, has it? Overextended yourselves with that new office building."

"Wrong again. I'm not calling professionally. Louie, you know that Joe Trumbull died, don't you?"

There was a moment's silence before Louie's voice, now bouncing low, said, "Joe? No, I hadn't heard. Gosh that's awful. How old was he?"

"Fifty-three, I think. He died—oh, about four weeks ago. He got caught in a storm up in Maine waters—you may remember, he was quite a sailor—and he must have got hit by the boom or something. Anyway, they found the boat capsized and Joe floating not too far from it."

"Oh gee, Ave, that's awful. I can't tell you how sorry I am to hear it."

"Well, you know, Louie, he was someone I guess we all thought was pretty extraordinary, quiet as he was. I don't suppose there was another master who was held in more affection by our class."

"No, I guess not. Gee, that's terrible news."

"Anyway, a couple of us got the idea that it might be nice if the class could donate some sort of memorial to the school in Joe's name. Naturally the first thing we thought of was Joe's woodworking shop. You may remember how old and pretty well shot most of those tools were. That one band saw was almost a joke, the way it couldn't hold a blade, and even the chisels had had about two inches honed off them. So we came up with the idea of complete new equipment—hand tools, a new band saw, lathe, drill press and maybe even a planer—and then putting up a small plaque, nothing large or too obvious, saying that all shop equipment was a gift of the Class of 1950 in memory of Joe Trumbull."

"I think that's a swell idea. At this point I wouldn't know a lathe from a planer, but it sounds to me like a perfect gesture."

"You're the last one to be called, Louie—you know, going at it alphabetically—and if we could count on you for twenty-five dollars we'd have all we need. Only two fellows, two out of the forty-five we've been able to locate, have turned us down."

"You've sold me, Ave, don't worry. I'll write out a check today."

"That's great, Louie. We can go ahead then with the actual gift. My address, by the way, is——"

"Ave?"

"Yes?"

"Listen, tell me about yourself. I don't think I've seen you since—gee, I guess it's since graduation. Are you married?"

Sparling reached across the desk to extinguish his cigarette. "I have been married, Louie, but very soon I'm going to be divorced."

Predictable pause, followed by predictable commiseration.

Sparling went on. "It's not anything sudden. We have no children, so it's only a matter of two people going their own ways after a good try. I don't think I told you I'm in United's overseas division—we had two tours, three years each, one in Costa Rica and the last in Hon-

duras, and I suppose you can say it just wasn't the right life for her."

"Well, as you said, there are no children and that's a blessing—I mean, as far as——"

"Sure. So anyway, I'm waiting for the final papers, and after that I'll be reassigned."

"How is it with the bank?"

"Fine. Everything's going very well. I've had some luck, I guess. It's all been a mighty help in—well, keeping these last years from seeming wasted."

"I'm glad to hear it. Where are you staying, Ave?"

"At the Harvard Club."

"Say, listen, you wouldn't by some chance be free tonight, would you?"

Sparling considered. Of the many St. Andrew's classmates with whom he had failed to keep in touch, Louie Wexler had been more a case of circumstance than choice. He had some happy memories of Louie.

"Yes, I am free."

"Wonderful. You didn't have a chance to ask about me, but it's mostly been very humdrum and domestic. Married, one child, another in the oven. Come on up tonight for dinner. You can meet my dependents and receive directly the fruits of your shakedown."

Sparling accepted Louie's invitation, and after getting an uptown address and a time of eight o'clock, he drew the call to a close. Upon hanging up the receiver, he checked Louie's name off his list, wrote \$25.00 beside it, and slipped the paper in the center drawer of his desk.

For the next half hour Sparling sat with the wooden swivel chair pushed back to its maximum angle, resting his crossed legs on a corner of the desk and picking his way through some of the mass of reports and memoranda whose digestion and comprehension were at present his only responsibility. Much of the information was familiar to him, having in some manner been tossed into the river of paper flowing between United New York and United Honduras, a fact unknown to whoever had compiled his reading. He was fighting sleep when the phone rang.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Wallace on the line."

"Good, put him on."

Wallace was his lawyer, an astonishingly efficient and impersonal savior recommended by Larrabee, Sparling's immediate superior. His news, fully expected, gave Sparling no elation, no sense of relief, in fact, no feeling at all: The agreement with Alice had been settled and was ready for his signing.

"It's what we stood by," said Wallace. "Three hundred dollars a month exclusive of medical payments, as long as she's not working. Half that once she takes a job."

"Didn't she try for more?"

"She tried."

Sure she tried, thought Sparling, like a mouse paralyzed by sight of the trap.

"So what's the next step?"

"She's already signed it. Once you sign it, that's it."

"Shall I come to your office?"

"No, it's too hot a day for you to go forty blocks. I've already sent it downtown by messenger. You should have it in the next hour. There are four copies and each has to be signed in three places, wherever I've checked with a pencil. But read it over first, and call me if there are any questions. Forget about the notary; we'll take care of that."

So here it was, the old stroke of the pen. The moment called for something more than the perfunctory thanks of a client, but that was all Sparling had in him.

However, if the reaction of his emotions was nil, the reaction of his conscience was formidable. Repeatedly he had to tell himself that three hundred dollars a month was the most he could afford, at least without knowing where his next assignment would take him, and whenever he sensed his mind ballooning with a fanciful picture of Alice alone in Reno, possibly prey to the canned comforts of some divorce-ranch cowboy, he forced himself to try to puncture it flat with another, altogether unfanciful, picture—Alice and Tito Estrada naked together in his bed.

That afternoon, the divorce agreement in the inside pocket of his jacket, Sparling wandered uptown and entered the first movie house he encountered. He had had no trouble checking out with Larrabee, that understanding man, who should also have been told that the agree-

ment had finally come through, so that the bank might get on with Sparling's reassignment. Sparling had not told him, nor had he signed the agreement. He craved distraction as he had not craved it in weeks. His task of raising money for Joe Trumbull's little memorial was completed. His old New York and Harvard friends had done well by him, but under the cloud of his difficulties invitations had trickled down to nothing. Entering the lobby of the theater, he began to warm genuinely to the prospect of seeing Louie Wexler again. Louie didn't know it but Sparling had seen him once since their St. Andrew's days. It had been in the Harvard stadium, after a game. Louie was in a crowd jammed around an exit several sections from Sparling. He was laughing alongside a short, bewildered-looking girl (Sandy?) and was wearing a green Tyrolean hat with the inevitable brush tucked in its band. Sparling had called out, but Louie and his girl had almost immediately disappeared into the dark maw of the exit. As he took his seat, Sparling recalled as a rather indifferent afterthought that in their class of forty-nine boys, Louie Wexler had been the only Jew.

It was a new apartment building, one of the kind that reminded Sparling of a Roman town. The neighborhood was unfamiliarly far north, but he saw that the immense structure was like a number of others going up or just completed along the former el-blighted boulevard of Third Avenue. Its principal material was the same sandy-colored brick, and every façade—there seemed no limit to the number of corners—was studded with identical terrace platforms like steppingstones for the convenience of a gargantuan cat burglar. If he had not come up in a cab he would have been at a loss as to where he should enter, but the cabbie was knowledgeable and without hesitation swooped down a narrow driveway branching off Eighty-first Street and deposited him *under* the building before a glass-curtained lobby.

It was not a simple lobby. It had corridors and exits—to "the gardens," to a restaurant, to mysterious connecting passageways and management offices—and at least two large atriums with illumined waters and couches. Low and flat it was not unthinkable that someone might

miss one and trip over it. Sparling got his bearings from a tall, lantern-jawed doorman, and was directed to an elevator designated "A-F."

He ascended to the discreet strains of a string ensemble piped out of a modest firmament of stars blinking, blinking above him.

Louie's apartment was 4D: There was no question of that, for his name was on the door. Behind the door a heldentenor was straining at high volume. With Sparling's second ring of the chimes, someone turned down the sound, and Louie's voice was heard calling, "That must be Ave." A few seconds later the door was opened and bantam Louie Wexler was grinning up at his old classmate.

"Well, well," he said, hand outstretched, jacketless. "Fourteen years, would you imagine that's how long it's been?"

"Good to see you, Louie," said Sparling, taking his hand for two quick pumps. Sparling noted that the other held a short glass filled only with well-melted ice cubes.

"Sandy," Louie called back over his shoulder, "come on out here and meet Ave."

From an invisible quarter a low-pitched yet girlish voice answered, "In a minute, darling. I'm putting something in the oven."

"Tonight's the maid's night off, wouldn't you know it," Louie said, closing the door.

"You should have called me back and we could have made it another time."

"Oh, listen, it doesn't matter. Sandy actually loves to get a chance in the kitchen—the maid was really more her mother's idea—and after all, this is an occasion. Say, you know you're looking darn well."

Had he really seen him yet, to say that? "Thanks, you don't look too bad yourself."

"My one object in life is to be well taken care of. That's my secret. Come on in and sit down." Louie emphasized the suggestion with a hand on Sparling's back.

They had actually been "in"—that is, in the apartment's one immediate, visible room—all the time. Sparling was versed enough in the code of demarcations for New York apartment layouts to appreciate that where

they were standing, a spot distinguished only by naked vinyl tile, was the foyer or gallery, and that by moving a few steps onto a large broadloom carpet they had entered the living room.

Trying not to ogle, Sparling took in the fact that the Wexlers' living room had been Decorated. Most of the pieces were bulbous *bombé*, cream white and decorated with gilt carvings. Among others, unclassifiable, were a large green sofa that negotiated one corner like a boomerang, a complementing kidney-shaped coffee table of brown marble (bearing bowls of potato chips and cheese dip), and a camel saddle serving as a low seat. Somehow they all seemed compatibly suited—mutually tamed, as it were—allowing even for the room's four table lamps, none of which stood under three feet. On the walls were hung several landscape oils, all of an insipid bucolia that Alice would have dismissed as calendar art, all lighted by individual gallery lamps. The one other picture in the room was a photograph standing on a side table, a gold-framed wedding portrait of the girl Sparling had seen with Louie in Harvard stadium.

"These are our lodgers," said Louie, indicating a stupendous wire birdcage Sparling had missed. Inside it were three benign, multicolored parakeets, two asleep and the third blinking. "I usually mix up the names, but I think this is John, this one's Foster and this is Dulles. Before we married, Sandy swore she'd never have a pet, but I guess who brought these three home one day."

Before Sparling could comment, they were joined by Louie's wife. As she came up to Sparling, all shy smile and pregnant middle, he realized just how short a girl she was (but of course; she had stood in the stadium that day, a good head *shorter than Louie!*). As she was altogether in good proportion, little as well as short, and possessed a lovely ingenuous face with a milky glow, Sparling found her highly attractive.

"I'm glad you could come," she said, her voice, now vis-à-vis, definitely low-timbered. "I haven't met many of Lou's school friends. (Lou, eh? Sparling would stick with the Louie he knew.) But I'm angry with him for not telling you to come up earlier. Then you could have met David."

"That's our son," said Louie. "Three years old and good as can be. Seven o'clock is his bedtime; you barely have to nod in the right direction and he's on his way."

"Darling, please turn that off."

Louie moved to the hi-fi and took off a record. "You like opera, Ave?"

"So-so."

"I could listen to it endlessly. To me it's the most *complete* drama there is. Of course the singers have to be good. Say, how stupid of me, let me take your jacket and make you a drink."

Sparling kept his jacket but agreed to the drink. "Whatever you're having."

"Martini on the rocks. That OK?"

Sparling nodded as Sandy told him to sit down, *please*, and she would duck out for a moment to get the hors d'oeuvres. Louie hadn't finished mixing the drinks before she was back with a plate of tidbits—sausage slices on Ry-Krisp, toasted cheese and something wrapped in rings of bacon. After a tingling sip of Louie's cold and very dry Martini, Sparling tried one of the little mysteries and found it to be a water chestnut, warm and delicious. He complimented Sandy, now settled on the floor with all her lower torso concealed under the tent of her maternity blouse. Soon he felt most comfortable, deeply impressed in the soft green field of the sofa, and for the first time in many hours his sternum began to unknot.

Louie carried most of the conversation, prompted by Sparling's leads. He had gone on to Tufts, along with Barney Childs—he was one of the fellows they hadn't been able to locate.

"I don't know as I'd have been any help to you, Ave. Barney pretty much went his own way at Tufts. In fact he dropped out in his sophomore or junior year. Headed out to the West Coast, I believe. Say, won't you have some of this dip?" springing up and helping himself.

Sparling declined—the Martini would do its best work undisturbed, save perhaps for a few more water chestnuts. So what had Louie done at Tufts? How had he liked it?

"It's a good place. It was what I wanted—a small campus, good faculty. I mean, it's nothing to compare

with a university like Harvard. And there's a lot of that silly fraternity crap that becomes sort of a second religion to most of the guys."

"You didn't join one?" Sparling asked, reasonably sure that Tufts, like most fraternity colleges, would have at least one Jewish frat.

Louie smiled and finished his Martini. "I didn't have to. I met Sandy when I was a sophomore. I would work hard during the week and even on some weekends—I got to be a real grind, Ave, at least for the first three years—and then on other weekends I'd be with Shirley Temple here. It was a good-enough life. Let me get you a refill, Ave."

Sparling was barely half done with his drink. He said not yet, and Louie got up and went to the liquor cabinet.

Sandy watched her husband working over the Martini pitcher. "I was only a junior in high school when I met Lou," she said, turning to Sparling. "The first date was more or less arranged by our parents, so I guess he was expecting a miserably dull time. I know I was."

"Sure," said Louie. "Ave must know how these things work out. Noble results from ignoble beginnings. Anyhow, there's nothing very exciting to tell about a seven-year engagement."

"What was your major?" Sparling asked.

"Government. Tufts was one of the few places with a government department—sort of a mishmash of history, current affairs, politics, diplomacy. I managed to make it only through good old sweat of the brow. I tell you, those first three years were brutal, at least they were for me."

Sparling remembered that Louie at St. Andy's had been their foremost debater. For two years he had held the anchor position of rebuttalist on an otherwise mediocre team. His counterarguments—dogged, shrewd, at times flamboyant—had saved a number of matches.

"And in senior year you coasted."

"Not exactly. You see, most of my grinding was with the foreign-service exam in mind. I took it junior year, passed everything except the second-language part. Hell, you remember me in Bisbee's French class. About the only thing I retained of French was that battle cry of those schoolboys we read about in some reader—*à ba*

les lentilles!” ” He raised his glass and repeated mock-heroically. “*à bas les lentilles!*” Anyhow, after flunking my foreign service, it all became kind of pointless. I mean the goal had sort of vanished, and in that sense I coasted. Besides, if I hadn’t let up I think I would have been weaving baskets before long.”

“Can’t you retake that exam?” said Sparling. “I was an English major, but a friend told me about it and what a monster it was. Seems to me most of the fellows taking it and passing were actually in grad school, or else pretty bright seniors.”

Sandy regarded him steadily and said, “Lou would have had to take at least two years of language before trying it again. Also”—breaking out a dull smile—“I was getting a little tired of knitting socks in that decrepit lumpy armchair Lou had in his room and watching him humped over his desk driving himself on.”

“My nurse,” said Louie.

They covered in the same random mood Louie’s somewhat implausible Army career. Having been assigned from basic training to duty atop a Chicago hotel manning a Nike radar station, he had persuaded an incredulous S-1 major to have his orders switched with those of a newly married barracks buddy unhappily destined for shipment to the Far East. After sixteen months in a windswept valley in Korea, Louie had hurried home to Sandy and a job with Raleigh Mills, determined henceforth to look out for himself. By the time Sandy excused herself to see to their dinner, Sparling was more or less certain of two things: that Louie had advised his wife of Sparling’s marital crisis, there had been such delicate little inquiry in his direction, and that Louie was working on his fifth Martini. He had also experienced a profound and rather awed attraction to Sandy Wexler. She was little, she was young, but she was paramountly woman. As she went off to her duties, Sparling watched the strong, almost blocky muscles of her calves, wondering whether agony or joy lay between them.

The dining table had been extended with the addition of a center leaf and fully set before his arrival. It stood in an alcove off the kitchen, and in no time Sandy had it

replete with food. The main dish seemed to be a seafood casserole.

"How about some wine," said Louie, "some nice Wente Brothers?"

Sandy looked up from the salad bowl and said, "I don't think so, darling . . . unless you'd like it, Ave."

Sparling said no. They sat down, Sandy between the two men and with her back to the kitchen. Louie served the casserole while Sandy passed hot rolls and the endive salad.

"It's not much," she said, "but we prefer light dinners in the summer and, besides, there's a rich dessert."

"Let me guess," said Louie, "a mousse?"

Sandy merely smiled.

The casserole was superb. Alice's casseroles had always been a bit gluey, but this was like a fondue, smooth as cream and with a complex underground of flavors. Louie dispatched his as if it might evaporate given the slightest delay. All had seconds, Louie sheepishly had thirds. The conversation played around politics—Sandy was with a young reform group active in district affairs—and, following the arrival of a strawberry mousse, around the halcyon days of St. Andy's. Sparling was surprised and amused at Louie's nostalgia—he couldn't recall reading any note Louie had sent in to the class column of the alumni bulletin, yet here he was, going on about a St. Mark's game and about the student body lusting after the school dietician, all with a fervor that would have been embarrassing at a class reunion. Louie halted finally to serve brandy and to retrieve two cigars for the men. When he had returned and was again seated, he said nothing for a long while, seeming lost in the oral ritual of his cigar.

Presently he said, "You remember, Ave, when I first came to St. Andy's?"

"Not too well. You came as a sophomore, didn't you?" Louie nodded, smiling distantly. "I was in Winthrop that year," Sparling said. "You were in a different house, which one I can't remember."

"It was Bancroft. No, we didn't get to know each other right off, in fact, not for quite a while. I roomed alone that year, as I did the other years. But I wasn't homesick

or lonely. Gee, for me, being on my own, out from Papa and Mamma, was about the greatest thing that had ever happened. Of course coming in late after most of the groups and friendships had been formed put me on my own with a sort of vengeance, but I didn't mind. Even when one of the guys—I can't remember for sure who it was, maybe Roy Decker, he had that kind of sense of humor—stole my skullcap and put it on the head of Milton—a *bust* of Milton, honey, on a shelf in Mr. Adams's English class—you know, I really didn't feel bad. The whole business was so new to me, so *exotic*, it didn't seem quite real, like landing on a new planet, something that would take a lot more *observing* before I really knew how I stood."

"Did everyone think it funny, that joke with your *yarmulke*?" Sandy asked.

"Honey, I was the only Jew in the class, maybe in the whole school."

"No," said Sparling. "I think there was a senior. Solomon?"

"You see, honey, St. Andy's is an old New England church school. High Episcopal. Traditionally straight W.P.R.—White Protestant Republican. Only times were beginning to change when we were kids, and I guess the trustees figured they had better catch up with the enlightenment. So they took in Solomon—are you sure about him, Ave?—and me, and for all I know, by now they may have twenty Jews there along with a couple of colored boys. But I tell you, I was some *rara avis*. Mamma had insisted I keep up my training, so every Saturday Mrs. Henning, our housemother, would have to drive me almost twenty miles to the nearest synagogue for my shul. The first couple times I kind of dumbly wore my cap into the car—this was before Decker's little joke—and what with having to wait for Mrs. Henning to get herself together I collected quite a crowd of the Bancroft curious. By the time we pulled out, you'd have thought it was Napoleon going off to Elba. But anyhow, as I've said, it never really *got* to me. And in less than a month something happened that very definitely changed things for me. That was when I got to know you, Ave, and I guess most of my classmates. Remember Flag Night?"

"Of course," said Sparling. "How could I forget it?"

"Spare us," said Sandy.

"Flag Night was a big traditional riot night at St. Andy's," Louie explained to his wife, as if she had not just spoken. "The flag was actually a pair of red drawers that the junior class had one of their members put on, usually someone like an assistant manager of the squash team. He wore nothing else, only a tin cup underneath for obvious protection. A circle was outlined on one of the athletic fields, and he would have to stand inside it. His classmates would form a ring around him and then it was the job of the sophomores to break through, get the flag off the poor idiot inside, run about three hundred yards to the school flagpole, pin it on a lanyard and run it up. Meanwhile the president of the senior class would be stationed in the chapel tower. If he could make out the red flag on top of the pole with his naked eye, then the sophomores had won. The other seniors would be down on the field acting as referees—breaking up any fist fights and untangling pile-ons—and the freshmen would be just standing around with their mouths hanging open. Of course, if the sophomores got the pants off, the juniors could still win if they got their hands back on them and ripped away enough so that there was nothing to be seen from the tower. Boy, I tell you, it was some brawl."

Sparling remembered that night clearly. Nothing could have made him interrupt Louie's telling.

"It started off and went on for a while like a real stalemate. Our class at first used the old spearhead tactic—moving around in groups, trying to find some weakness in the defenses. Only whenever they formed a concentration, the juniors would concentrate their own forces there and stand them off. Then they tried opening up a gantlet for a couple of guys to run through—a bunch blocking in one direction and another bunch blocking in the opposite direction—but the juniors would just open up, grab the two guys as they came in, and throw them back out of the circle.

"Now in those days I wasn't much smaller than I am now. I weighed about the same, maybe five pounds less, but I was compact and really quite wiry. I had come down in a pair of short-cut Levis and at first joined in

like everybody, with no idea of what I was doing. Here were all my classmates whizzing around me, yelling, 'Hey, Jim; Hey, John; over here; get behind Fred,' and so on. Everybody was wrapped up in some kind of grim strategy, everybody but me, it seemed, and nothing was working. To hell with it, I thought, and pulled out of the mess to join the freshmen and watch my insane classmates trample each other. But then, as I stood off to the side, I noticed a funny thing. My whole class was marshaled behind two guys, the only two sophomores to make first string on the football team, both big burly linemen, and on the other side of the juniors' circle there was no one. Not only that, there were only two juniors left there to defend, and even they were looking back at the big melee."

He paused, rolling his cigar lightly between thumb and forefinger, his eyes steeled from Sandy.

"I put my hands in my back pockets and just sort of sauntered over there as if I was an observer from the U.N. I walked past the two juniors and in no time I was standing right next to the guy wearing the flag. Maybe somebody saw me, maybe not, but anyway, *who the hell knew me?* The guy had his back to me and was all tense, waiting for the breakthrough. I tripped him up and had the shorts down to his knees before he knew what was happening. Then he started to kick, but that only ripped them open and made the rest of their removal a simple matter. I had them in my hand and was looking up. It was only a fraction of a second, but I could sense that the wild noise had suddenly cut down to almost nothing, and I saw the two juniors I had walked past now standing there frozen, staring at me. I was up then like a fiend, running *at* them. I don't know what they expected—I had my head down, figuring that the time for observing was over. I smacked into one of them going full tilt and heard a big gasp. The blow staggered me off at an angle, but I didn't fall. I knew I was in the open and that I had to make a wide turn to get on line with the flagpole. I ran—boy, I don't think I ever ran harder in my life. The noise was back again wilder than ever and now it was all coming at me. I had to look back, and when I did, do you know what I saw?—I saw these characters who had

stared at me like a freak when I was sitting in Mrs. Henning's car, all blocking out juniors so that I could make it to the flagpole. They were all falling to the ground, and even after they had fallen, they'd get up on their knees and yell and yell after me—I couldn't hear what they said, but their mouths were all open and yapping. Seeing that, I think I could have run six hundred yards. There was no one really near me, but I still ran so hard that after I had gotten to the flagpole, pinned the damp flag on and hoisted it to the top, everything that was in my stomach came up and I chucked all over the base of the pole."

By rights, thought Sparling, he should be out cold now. He had drunk enough to lay low both of them.

"When my class caught up with me there was pandemonium. My back was pounded and suddenly there was an arm under my leg and I was being lifted onto a couple of shoulders. All the wheels of the class were there, cheering. Ave here, he was one of the wheels. In fact, it was you who said the first words that anyone could make out over all that din. Do you remember?"

Sparling knew what was coming but could only smile and nod, knowing that just as on that Flag Night fifteen years ago, Louie would not be stopped.

"You raised your arms and soon everything was more or less quiet. I can see it as clearly as I can this table. You raised your arms, and then when everyone was listening you yelled, 'Hurray for Louie the Jew! Three cheers for Louie the Jew!' "

She was looking at Sparling as if the sun were in her eyes. For once he had no resources. He could think only of homilies or lame, false protests. They were all boys then, weren't they? But no, for her they would be their parents' children, infected with life's most vicious proposition.

She turned her head and spoke between the two men: "I think that's the most mortifying story I've ever heard."

"Oh, honey, it's not that at all. I was as new to them as they were to me. So I was Louie the Jew. So how many great princes were called 'the Bastard'? It's not what you're called, it's what you're thought of."

"Listen, there's nothing you can't be 'thought of' if you

meet the price. Your whole little saga is in truth a thoroughly degrading confession of how you used some rite out of *Tom Brown's School Days* to prove that you belonged among the goyim."

It was then, at last, that the liquor seemed to catch up with Louie. His jaw began to tremble, and the conviction, or rather the strong, ear-true rhythm that had carried him through his story, went out of his voice. He mumbled.

"You don't understand. You just don't understand. After that night it didn't seem to make any difference. I mean I was just one. . . . Like on the debating team. I was good, I really was, and when we won a debate I was . . . you know, everyone was as happy as if I had scored a touchdown in a football game."

"You said before that you roomed alone all three years. Did anyone ever ask you to room with them?"

"Well, no. But that's the way I liked it. I mean, I wanted to have my own quarters and I think all the other guys knew that."

Sparling spoke up: "Louie was in our house senior year. When you get to be a senior, house groups are formed almost in the same way rooms are. There wasn't a senior in Peabody who wasn't glad Louie was living in the house."

"Wait a minute," she said. "Listen to what you just said, listen to it and *hear* all the implications—'in the same house' . . . 'glad he was living.' "

"All I'm trying to say is that when you're that age, the prejudices can't be big enough to blot out the essential, basic qualities of a person, once those qualities have had a chance to come out. Louie made his chance—in a kind of Jack Armstrong way, I'll admit—but after that, he's right, he was just another member of the class, and a pretty popular one too. Lord, Louie the Jew was a term of affection. Anyone with real prejudice wouldn't be that blatant to a man's face."

"They wouldn't? What about you? Are you prejudiced?"

"Honey," said Louie, "Ave's our guest."

"No," Sparling said to her, "I'm not."

"I don't believe you."

"There's no reason you have to."

She didn't speak immediately. She took a cigarette from a small silver cup and lit it. "I don't believe it from your appearance and from what little I know about you. You obviously come from a wealthy—what did he call it, W.P.R.?—background, probably New York or Boston, maybe Philadelphia or Baltimore."

"No, as a matter of fact, Cleveland."

"That's all right too. Lots of W.P.R. in the Midwest. You go to a New England prep, attractive, sure of yourself, you get a little circle of attractive, sure-of-themselves cronies and you become a wheel. The wheel rolls on to Harvard, perhaps with some of the old St. Andy's circle, and becomes even more attractive and sure of himself, despite having to share his new campus with a good number of lunchy undesirables. Perhaps one night he even tells some recent cronies about a quaint character back at prep school named Louie the Jew. After Harvard comes a small obligation—the Army, where there are certainly lots of Louie the Jews but maybe also a few of the old axis to bend an elbow with at the officers' bar and share dreams of all the assemblies and deb parties you're missing for your country's sake. Then maybe back for business school, or maybe it was business school before the Army—doesn't matter. You find yourself a sweet, mindless little post-ante-post deb, marry her and arrive on Wall Street, knowing you'll probably have to work with some Louie the Jews, banking being banking, but you also know—guess what—the old circle will still be around and, after all, New York was Fitzgerald's town. And oh yes, I almost forgot, that sweet little deb gets rather dull and boring after a few years so you drop her back into the post-post-post deb hopper and start going around to the old parties again."

Sparling saw that Louie had left the table. He was standing by the hi-fi, his cigar dead but still in his mouth. He was holding a record casing and gazing at the carpet. Sparling felt that his brains were on the table.

"First of all," he began, "what you've just presented is as cruel and stupid a cliché as the old hook-nosed, usurious cartoon of the Jew, which, in a way, you probably lean on more heavily than ninety-five percent of the W.P.R. population. So I won't try to sort out my fact from your

fiction—it would take us too long and get us nowhere. The only thing I'll answer is the last item, your mindless post-deb whom I married and am now discarding. She was a schoolteacher I found in a bar up in Cambridge. She had enough mixed blood in her to include, for all I know and care, a fair Jewish strain. You're much her superior on looks. Our married life was spent not in New York but almost entirely out of the country, in Central America. We both wanted children and we couldn't have them. Why, we still don't know. Without a child, she had nothing down there, no life to speak of. She had an affair. When she knew that I knew, she said it was because she was sure that I was the impotent one. However farfetched this, I could not entirely doubt her, even when she went on and had other affairs, until one time I discovered she had a native for a lover."

"Well! You mean a Spick."

"No, that's not what I mean and let me finish. Let me finish. It should be obvious to you that a child by a dark-skinned man couldn't very well be passed off as our own. I had to believe that she was finally, simply promiscuous. I couldn't live with her any longer. I'm letting her sue me. I don't understand her because I think she still loves me. I don't know what *I* feel, I just don't know. I don't understand." Looking at Louie's wife, at her set, unreadable face, unable to hate even this one, he felt a revulsion of himself and a pity for all men. And because the evening had become a dream, he couldn't believe there was a child standing in the room, complaining that he could not sleep.

When Sparling stepped out of the elevator into the lobby, he was met by the same doorman who had directed him up.

"Mr. Wexler just called down," he said. "He'd like you to wait for him."

Numbed, Sparling waited until a blanched Louie stepped out of another elevator.

"Listen, Ave, I want to apologize, God I want to apologize. I can't tell you how sorry I am about tonight. It wouldn't have helped if I had tried to stop her. It would only have made things worse."

Sparling nodded.

"Anyway," Louie said, "I didn't want to forget this." It was a check made out to Sparling for a hundred dollars.

He said, "Louie, this is much more than we need. It should be for twenty-five."

"Well, you said a couple of guys had turned you down, and then there were a few you couldn't locate. This'll make it seem like a hundred percent."

He didn't want to argue it, nor to tell him that the check should not be made out to his order. He smiled, pocketed the check, and shook Louie's hand.

"So long, Louie. And don't think about tonight."

He was almost to the door when Louie called after him. "You're going to be in town for a while longer, aren't you, Ave?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure."

"Maybe we can have lunch together someday. I'll give you a call."

Bantam Louie, no jacket, sober after five Martinis, standing across that gaudy lobby. "Sure," Sparling said, "do that."

When he got back to the Harvard Club, he did not immediately go in. He wandered off to stand in the shadows of a closed entranceway until he had managed to stop crying. It hardly mattered when he returned to the club, for only the night clerk was there to see him, and he was reading a paper. Up in his room, Sparling took out his pen, endorsed Louie's check, and then signed his divorce agreement twelve times, wherever there was a penciled checkmark. He had a cigarette, after which he took off his clothes and got into bed. Before going to sleep, he did some praying. As a boy he had prayed, but always for things or achievements. Now he prayed for people. He prayed first of all for himself, then for Alice, and then for Louie the Jew.

The Month of His Birthday

Henia Karmel-Wolfe

To his left, only a few feet away, a tree was casting a peninsula of shadow. For a moment he thought of getting under it but he didn't try, for he knew he was hurt and would never make it. The sun, high in the sky, hot and bright, was hurting his eyes and there wasn't a cloud in sight. He knew it must be past noon and wondered how long he had been lying there, after the others had left him behind, and what day it was. He lost count of time, he wasn't even sure anymore what month it was, as he wasn't sure of where he was. He knew they had made it all the way to the border of Silesia, but then they had been led in a circle and it seemed to him that they had gone all the way back to Saxony where they had started.

He could hear the airplanes flying low and explosions not too far away resounding in a loud echo and then all grew still.

Blood gushed up from his wound, forming a pool around him and covering his jacket, filthy and torn, until it was as red as the triangle on its left sleeve, and the yellow stripe over it could hardly be seen, for it was as red as blood. The red triangle stood for "political prisoner" and the yellow stripe for "Jew."

He thought that the sun had never been that strong in April, and that it must be May already, and if it was, it would have been three weeks since they had been marched out of the camp, and if it was, he was going to be eighteen years old soon, for May was the month of his birthday. Then suddenly he realized that he wouldn't be eighteen and he wouldn't see his birthday because he was dying.

The thought came to him slowly and dispassionately, as if it was not his thought at all, but the thought of someone else, standing aside—indifferent and uninvolved. It couldn't have been his thought for he didn't really believe it. "I am dying," he said aloud, although there was nobody there to hear him. He was surprised at his own voice; it sounded so strange he hardly recognized it. Somehow he felt as if he were acting a big dramatic part in a great tragedy. He looked down at his wound, deep and torn and bleeding, gazed at the layers of skin, flesh, and fat with an impersonal almost scientific interest, musing about the complete absence of pain. "One day when I tell about it, nobody'll believe me," he thought. But then he remembered he wouldn't be telling it to anybody, ever, because he was dying.

He had often wondered what it was like—dying. He had lived with death for the last few years and he was, so to speak, on first-name basis with her. He would talk of death with an air of familiarity in a carefree, gossipy way as if she were an old acquaintance, and he would even crack jokes about her, in order not to admit how scared he really was. But he hadn't known what death meant, not really, not until now. Now he knew. It meant being alone. The sun, hot and burning from above, the merciful tree spreading its shade—not for him; the sounds of warfare echoing from afar, and all alone. . . .

"Not even a candle," he thought in a sudden flow of self-pity. Then he remembered that no candles were lit for those who had vanished during the last few years. One said one didn't know the day, one said one didn't know for sure. . . . But now, in his new, suddenly acquired wisdom he knew that a candle wouldn't be enough, and that even this would be too much to take.

But they did light it for her, then, for Celina, his aunt. He was very little, still in kindergarten; strange that he should remember it so clearly. She was young and had never been sick before. She died suddenly, catching them unprepared, not giving them enough time to get used to the idea. Now he knew that she too was alone. Even if there were doctors bending over her and people whispering in the room, and others anxiously waiting behind the

closed doors, she too was all alone. Because it was a lonely thing—dying.

They all came to the house after the funeral. Father and Grandma, uncles and aunts. They lined up little stools along the wall, no bigger than the ones in kindergarten. They had to stoop to sit on them, and they bent forward and buried their faces in their hands. They sat there in their stockinged feet; a bearded man came and made an incision in their clothes with a pocket-knife. People were coming and going, people he had never seen before, leaving the front door open, as if there was a party going on inside, so that the next ones wouldn't have to ring the bell. They sat opposite the others, but on regular chairs that made them seem so much taller and bigger. They didn't shake hands, they didn't even talk, just sat there and seemed terribly preoccupied with their own hands, folding and unfolding them, turning an object—a pocketbook or a hat—throwing furtive glances toward the door. As soon as somebody else walked in they would rise, suddenly relieved, and leave as if they were in a great hurry. The mirrors were covered with white sheets. He didn't know why and he never did ask. He should have, for now suddenly he wished he knew.

They remembered her with whispers, Aunt Celina; they remembered her with sighs and then they remembered her with a candle. (They lit it once a year for her, the way they did for his grandfathers and for his grandmother on his mother's side.) It was a strange candle in a very thick glass, its flame flickering and weak. He would tiptoe around it, cautious and frightened. The little flame seemed to wink at him and watch him like an eye. The day the candle was lit he made sure not to do anything he wasn't supposed to, afraid that otherwise the little flame would burst into a big fire and devour him. But once he forgot. He was in school and he didn't think about it at all, and he told a lie. It wasn't a very big lie, nobody ever discovered it. He himself wouldn't have given it another thought, but then suddenly he remembered the candle. All the way home he tried to comfort himself that it had been lit last night and by the time he got there, it would be gone, the glass put away, the table dusted and covered with a lace doily. But it wasn't. The candle was there,

waiting for him. The wax was almost melted, with only a little bit left at the bottom of the glass, just enough for a short wick and a little bluish flame flickering and reproachful. He squatted next to it, remorseful and scared, whispering, "I didn't mean, I didn't mean to."

That was a long time ago when he was very small, when the world around him was small and uncomplicated, when life (and even death) acted according to firmly set rules. The world was neatly divided with a straight, almost visible geometrical line. On one side there were the rich, on the other side the poor; there were Jews, and there were non-Jews. His family was rich and they were Jews. They were rich, for they lived in a house of their own and had maids. They were Jews, for there were some things they did and many things they didn't do. Most of the people he knew were rich and were Jewish. The poor ones would come to the back door and were given a meal, and sometimes were asked inside and Mother would give them bundles of used clothes. They would grab Mother's hand and try to press it to their lips. She would free it angrily and say, "Oh, please, stop that nonsense," but he knew she wasn't angry, not really. The non-Jews were the janitors, the maids, and the peasant women, who covered their heads with colorful kerchiefs, and brought wild strawberries during the summer months. As he grew bigger, so did the world around him; the line shifted and wasn't straight anymore. He learned that there were shades and nuances to being poor or rich or even Jewish, and that there were other people besides the janitors and the maids who were gentiles. When they moved down the street from their own house to an apartment, because they moved down from being very rich to being just rich, he met some of them. Like the family on the second floor, Kutynski was their name. He was glad they moved, for there were children living in the house. The Kutynskis had two of them: a boy, Tadek, bigger than he, his hair cropped like that of a soldier; and a girl, Ursula, just about his age. Her eyes were blue; her hair, almost white, fell down her back in two long, heavy braids.

He stood in the backyard and watched them play.

Tadek and the boys were playing hide-and-seek and Ursula was jumping rope. He watched her, fascinated by the way she did it: Fast, without getting it tangled between her feet, first with both feet, then changing from left to right and then to left again, her braids bouncing rhythmically as she jumped. She was chanting one of those nonsensical jingles girls always chant while skipping rope. When he moved closer she was all out of breath, but she didn't stop and kept on jumping though she gave him a slanted look out of the corner of her eye and chanted, "Little ki-ke, lit-tle ki-ke is sel-ling her-ring, is selling pike." He didn't quite follow the words or understand them but there was a faint malicious smile dancing around her mouth.

He started toward the house, first slowly, then, after making sure she couldn't see him anymore, he ran to the front entrance, through the dark hallway, to the staircase and up, taking two steps at a time. He was panting heavily when his mother opened the door for him. "For heaven's sake, what happened?" she asked. He didn't answer. She touched his forehead with the palm of her hand.

"Thank God," she sighed with relief. "For a moment I thought you had fever."

"Mother," he said, "what's pike?"

"It's some kind of fish," she said. "Why?"

Somehow he knew he shouldn't ask what "kike" was.

Now, all alone, his life ebbing away, he wondered if the fish that night was a pike. . . .

He had gotten up, awakened by the voices and the sound of loud laughter coming from the kitchen, and sneaked out of bed. He stood there by the open kitchen door trembling a little, for the night was cold and frost covered the windowpanes with flowery designs. Julka the cook, Mariya the maid, and Yanova the washwoman—who came twice a month to do the big wash—were preparing the Christmas Eve supper. His parents had gone out for the evening, to let them celebrate alone. A little tree had even been allowed in the kitchen. It was nothing like the Kutynskis' tree he saw through their window,

its top almost reaching the ceiling, its branches bending under the weight of colorful bulbs and gilded walnuts. This one was small, not bigger than a potted plant, its only ornament the silvery threads of "angels' hair" streaming down its branches. He looked at the tree, at the turkey just taken out of the oven, at the big cake covered with white frosting—and then the bowl. And there it was, not cooked yet, cut into long pieces, that seemed still alive and jumped from time to time as if in a convulsion. The smell was sweet and sickening, and he felt his stomach go up to his throat.

"What's *that*?" he asked disgustedly, pointing at the bowl.

"Fish," Julka said. "What are you doing out of bed anyway, and barefoot too?"

"And that?" he asked, coming closer, touching the red phlegmy substance in which the pieces were swimming.

"That's blood," Mariya said, and then she smiled broadly, showing a gold tooth and a gap next to it, and lowering her voice she said as if to herself, "Jewish."

"Ma-ri-ya," Julka said warningly. Mariya stepped back as if afraid Julka might hit her and mumbled, "Oh, I was only kidding." Then turning to him she said, "You know Mariya was only kidding, don't you?"

"I won't have such kidding around here," Julka said.

"Oh," Mariya said, regaining her composure, "big thing, he doesn't even understand."

Julka cut a piece of cake and handed it to him. "Here, little one, eat it and to bed with you."

Although he didn't feel like eating, he munched on the cake just so as not to let them know that he knew, that he did understand. He started back to his room and heard Mariya from the kitchen. "Do you think he will tell Madam?" she was asking anxiously.

"It would serve you right if he does," Julka said. "To say such a thing to a child!"

He tried to go back to sleep, but the pillow felt hot and he kept on turning it over. Then he sat up on his bed and pounded furiously with clenched fists. "I'll tell on her, tomorrow I'll tell on her," he kept repeating. "They will throw her out. They pay her, they can throw her out."

But tomorrow arrived and when his mother came to

his room to kiss him good morning and asked him how his night had been, he said fine and he added nothing more.

He looked down and saw that the pool of blood around him had grown bigger. He felt weak and very tired, a little as if he were drunk, and were floating in the air. He closed his eyes, and then out of nowhere, out of the void she came—Ursula Kutynski. She was grown up now, like himself, and looked ridiculous in the short pink pinafore dress, her braided hair falling down her back. She was skipping rope and chanting: "Little ki-ke is dy-ing, lit-tle ki-ke is dy-ing." "No," he screamed. "No."

He shuddered and opened his eyes. He was afraid to close them again, because he knew that right there, under his eyelids, there she was, Ursula Kutynski, waiting for him.

A single explosion, close and powerful, shook the earth and seemed to have hit the sun, for it suddenly disappeared. He looked up. The clouds were gathering now and a big one, gray and shaped like the map of Africa, covered the sun. Other clouds, light and white like cotton candy, were chasing each other playfully in the blue sky. Long ago, in the fifth grade, he had learned all about clouds. He knew what they were called, and which one brought rain; he had made a beautiful chart of them using white and black crayons on blue paper. The sky now looked like that chart. There was something else it reminded him of, he didn't quite know what, and tried very hard to remember. Then suddenly, between the big gray cloud that looked like the map of Africa and the white ones like cotton candy, he saw them—the hands. He saw them distinctly, the fingers stretched apart, the thumbs touching each other. "The hands," he whispered, "the hands"; and then, "He never looked down, all this time, He never looked down." He didn't quite know why he said "the hands," or who it was who didn't look down, and then it all came back to him. The Book.

There were many books in their home. Father's books, big and black and very old, their pages yellow and moldy. Mother's books in colorful bindings stood on the shelves

in straight formation like soldiers. But this one was just "The Book." It had a place of its own on a round table with a marble top in Mother's room. (Her room was all lavender and ivory and smelled of lilacs in the spring and asters in the fall.) "May I look at The Book?" "I don't see why not," Mother would say, and then, "let me see your hands first." He would come to her, the palms of his hands turned up. "Go and wash up, and then you may look at the pictures." He would go and wash and let his hands be inspected again and then he would kneel next to the table, one hand supporting his chin, the other turning slowly the pages of the book. He would go through it, hardly glancing at the pictures until he found the one he was looking for. There was a man standing on the top of a mountain, his long, white beard waving in the wind like a flag. He held a stone tablet high over his head ready to drop it and break it against the rock. He was angry and the anger was coming out of his eyes with two zigzags like lightning. Below—it must have been far below, for they were very small—people were dancing in a circle, and above in the sky among the clouds of gray and white were the hands.

That was Moses, Mother told him. He was about to break the tablets with the commandments, because the children of Israel got impatient and danced around an idol they had made out of gold. And the hands, that's how the artist imagined God, who was sad, and covered His face, and didn't look down. "But where is His face?" he wanted to know. "You see," Mother said, and then interrupted herself. "You better ask your father about these things." "Jews don't paint God," his father said. "They don't make statues of Him, they don't imagine Him. Because He is above everything and beyond imagination." "Is it a sin to imagine?" His father thought for a while. "Yes," he said finally, "It is a sin." "A big one?" There was a pause again. "I think you could call it a big one," his father said.

So that's what it was—a sin. That's what he was doing all the time—sinning. His God had a face. He looked like Reb Yankel who lived next door to Grandma and would sit near the open window, bent over a big book placed on a windowsill. He had a long, white beard and his face

was wrinkled and yellow like the pages of his book. His eyes—immensely good and wise—were a faded blue, set deep under bushy eyebrows. And God looked like him, only more so.

At night, while already in bed, he would say his evening prayer. He would say it in Hebrew, the way Father made him memorize it. After he understood its meaning he found it beautiful. "Unto Thy hand I put my soul while I am asleep and when I wake up. I put my soul as I put my body. God is with me, I shall not fear." When he had finished saying it, he would lie very still and be careful not to utter another word, for one wasn't supposed to, and wait. He would wait for his soul to leave his body (he knew exactly where it was located, his soul, right in the pit of his stomach) and fly up. It didn't have a color, it didn't have a shape. It was like a soap bubble when the light reflects itself in it with the colors of the rainbow. It would fly up, weightless and light, straight into God's outstretched hand. And God, Who looked like Reb Yankel, only more so, would close His fingers over it gently and with love. Then He would look down, nod His head, wink His eyes, and smile good night at him. He would feel safe and at peace, fall asleep; all was well.

But then he knew it was a sin. He tried very hard not to imagine God's face. He only saw the outstretched hand. But there was something horrifying about the hand without a face, and he was afraid it would snatch his soul away from him greedily and that it might burst when the long, bony fingers closed over it. He didn't like to be scared, but he didn't want to sin either. So he stopped saying his evening prayer altogether. He never thought of it, he forgot about it completely. And now it came back to him clearly and distinctly. "Unto Thy hand I put my soul while I am asleep and when I wake up. I put my soul as I put my body. God is with me, I shall not fear." He whispered the words slowly and softly as he did when he was little. Only this time he didn't fall asleep. He passed out.

When he came to and opened his eyes, he saw a hand holding a water canteen close to his lips. Another hand was trying to lift his head. "There," a voice said, "drink."

It was a girl's voice. He drank thirstily. The water was cold and refreshing and tasted good and clean. "Who are you?" he said faintly. "Drink," the voice said again, and then, "I work here, in the farmhouse, for a Bauer, I found you."

He lifted his eyes, trying to see her face, but all he could see was a faded dress and a white rectangle with a black P on it. "You're a Freedom Pole?" (That's what they called them, the ones working in Germany, who could move freely around, "Freedom Poles.")

"Yeah," she said.

"What's your name?" he said.

"Anna."

He repeated her name, rolling it slowly as if he was tasting it with his tongue. "Anna," he whispered in a confidential tone of voice, as if he was letting her in on a big secret. "Anna, I am dying."

"No," she said.

She bent over him; he could see her face now. She was very young. Her face was tanned, her eyes were blue, her nose was small and turned up a little at the end. A lock of her hair bleached by the sun, showing from under a red kerchief, fell over her eyes as she shook her head.

"No," she repeated. "You are not. My Bauer had a look at you. He said you are hurt, badly hurt, and, oh my, you are skinny, but you will live. He understands everything about animals, my Bauer, when they are sick or hurt, and people are not so different. He will be here soon with a wagon and take you to the hospital."

"I am dying," he repeated stubbornly, like a child threatening to jump off the top of a tree.

"No," she said; there were tears in her voice. "You can't, not now. The Russians are in the next village, the Americans are twenty kilometers away, it wouldn't make sense. The war is over."

He heard her. He knew what she said. But he didn't stir. Somehow it didn't matter. Somehow he didn't care any more. All he knew was that he was tired, very tired, and wanted to close his eyes and sleep.

"Anna," he said, "where are you from?"

"Warsaw," she said.

He looked at her closely and carefully. She was a typ-

ical Pole, blond and blue-eyed, but yet, there was something in those eyes and in the way she said "Warsaw." "She is a Jew," he thought suddenly. "She is a Jew passing as a Pole." He wanted to ask her about it, but he didn't. Because suddenly he didn't want to know. He wanted to believe she was a Pole and a gentile, like Ursula Kutynski, and that this time she came to be good to him.

She took the kerchief off her head, dampened it with the water from the canteen, and went over his face. She brushed his hair off his forehead with her hand.

"Anna," he said.

"What?"

"Your hands."

She looked at them. They were red and callused. Unconsciously she clenched her fingers to hide the broken fingernails.

"What about my hands?" she said.

"They are kind. . . ." he whispered in a singsong, and he closed his eyes.

Heart of Gold

Mary Lavin

"THAT," said Lucy gaily, "that is something I cannot remember." She knew they would not believe her, but she didn't care.

"Was it the first night of all, Aunt Lucy?"

What they wanted to know was when exactly Sam had put the question. That it was scandalously soon they already knew. The whole town knew that. Tongues had begun to wag within an hour of his stepping from the Dublin train that night, and everyone guessed he'd come back to her, after all the years.

Dear Sam! You'd think they'd respect his faithful heart! But only the young had seen his love in a true light, had responded to the romance of it. And that was why she wouldn't have minded *them* knowing that he had declared himself on that first night of all, that he'd hardly stepped inside the door when he broached marriage. But she had Sam to consider. And a certain respect had to be shown to the dead wife. Although, mind you, Lucy's sisters had not shown much. The very day the woman died, the two of them came running from their own places down the street and into the house, screeching like oracles.

She was in the yard. Garden they called it! But the real garden had long gone to glory. It was compulsorily acquired by the town council when they were widening the Market Square. All she had was some plants in tubs. Those plants had gone up the walls like wildfire, though. Up on top of the wall, they flourished and spread until they'd covered up every unsightly thing in the place—the tin shed, the heaps of scrap iron, and all the castoff

rubbish of two generations. "I'm out here in the back yard," she said when she heard her sisters calling her name. They ran out to her—yes, ran. She hadn't seen either of them run in years!

"Lucy! Did you hear!" they cried. "Sam's wife is dead—Sam Lowndes!" they added.

"Oh, no!" she said, and she sank back against a bush of jasmine. Like a living creature, it gave way at the shock of her weight, then braced to take it. "Not Mona Hendron?" she said. A minute too late, she realized she had used Mona's maiden name.

Louise didn't miss the significance of that. "Take care!" she said. "You may find him at the door one of these days to see if you'll have him back!"

"Oh, don't be silly, Louise," Lucy said, taking this for a compliment and feeling it should be disclaimed.

But Louise had not meant it for one. "He'd be just the kind of old fool to do something like that!" she said. "Why didn't you marry him, anyway?"

Lucy bridled. "Why didn't I marry *any* of them—if it goes to that?" she said coldly. "He wasn't the only pebble on the beach!" It was a well enough established fact—and Louise and Bay had no business to forget it—that her beaux had been legion. Even those who had not known her in the old days had only to look at her to believe in her legend. Louise and Bay seemed to forget how sought after she had been. See how they tried just then to imply that Sam had been the only real string to her bow! She who went everywhere with a crowd of admirers circling around her!

Not that she ever took joy in her nimbus. She was forever shooing men away like wasps. But it only made them pester her the more. She was continually being waylaid behind some potted palm or Chinese screen. It got very tiresome—a fact that Louise and Bay never believed. They rarely gave her any sympathy, even after they were married themselves and when she—Well, now she could face it—when she had been left behind by the tide! The fact was that Sam was the only one she might have married, because only with him did she feel friendly and at ease. Indeed, they were very modern in the way they took things for granted about each other. The trou-

ble was that they took for granted the wrong things. Or Sam did. He just assumed that she'd never marry him.

It was Sam she told of her first and premature proposal at sixteen. They were coming home from school with their satchels on their backs when she told him. He nearly doubled up with laughing. They had to put down their satchels till they got their breath back, they laughed so much. In the years that followed, Sam was a party to many a laugh of the same sort. He was almost as quick as herself to spot when some poor fellow was about to fall for her, some newcomer to the town—a bank clerk, or a solicitor's apprentice, or maybe just a visitor in the hotel. "Poor fellow!" he'd say. "Poor fellow. Another case of Lucyitis!" He was never mistaken about these prospective suitors—only about the outcome of their suit. "Take care, Lucy," he'd say each time. "*This* one will sweep you off your feet." He never learned to take her treatment of one as an indication of how she'd treat the next. And when at last it became clear to him that she had given them all short shrift, he took it as a guarantee, being timid and humble, that he had no chance at all.

Then when he was the last man on the scene and she had reached her thirtieth year, he surprised her one evening. "What are you waiting for anyway, Lucy?" he asked out of the blue.

"For you, Sam!" she said promptly.

"Don't joke with me," he said soberly. "I know I never had any hope."

"You'd as good a chance as anyone," she said. And then, cautiously, she decided to give him a hint that she had certain misgivings. "Matrimony doesn't appeal to me," she said. But she hadn't disclosed anything, and so he didn't believe her, although for a minute she thought he had uncovered her fears.

"I suppose it's different for a man," he said. But it was a trouble of his own that concerned him. He bent his head. "I envy fellows that are married," he said.

It was the first time she'd realized that, living alone in a room in the Central Hotel, he might well long for a home of his own, but she was impatient with him for not seeing what it was that held her back.

"Why are you single so?" she cried.

He raised his head. "Because of you, Lucy," he said. "I'd stay single forever if I could be sure you would! But you might walk off one day and leave me in the lurch!"

"I'd never do that," she said. "We might be an old Darby and Joan yet—I wouldn't mind that at all!" Then, thinking she'd been very meaningful, she ran off, laughing and happy. Next time, she thought, she'd give him a broader hint.

But there was no next time. Lucy was hardly awake next morning when her sisters came into her room. "Did you hear what's being said, Lucy?" they cried. "It's all over the town that Sam's engaged! To Mona Hendron! It can't be true, can it?"

Never! she thought. Never. But she wasn't going to let herself down before them. "Why shouldn't it be?" she said coldly. She sprang out of bed, and a few minutes afterward she had left the house and gone uptown in the direction of the Central Hotel.

Before she got halfway, however, coming toward her, hurrying, with his head down, was Sam. "Oh, Lucy, I was coming down to see you," he cried.

"Is it true?" she cried.

That he didn't ask what she meant was the first sign she got that there was truth in what she'd heard. He looked frightened, too—or was he only unusually excited? "Is there talk, Lucy?" he asked anxiously.

"Talk! It's all over the town that you're engaged to Mona Hendron," she said, blurting it out.

What did she expect? Certainly not that he'd look relieved. But he did. "She was right so," he said. "I thought she was only having me on. I was going to come back and tell you last night, only it was very late. You see, Lucy, it was after I left you that it happened." He looked away. "Isn't it strange how things *do* happen," he said dazedly. "It was because I thought I saw you looking at my collar—it was frayed—that I went up to Simmons' to buy a new one before the drapery counter closed. And to think I never bought it!" He put up his hand to the collar, which indeed was very frayed, and soiled as well. "She was there, inside the counter." He gulped. "Mona," he said. "She was showing something to a young one that

was buying ribbon. They were laughing. Then, when the young one went out, Mona came over to serve me. 'Did you ever see one of these, Sam?' she said, and she had a card in her hand. It was a card cut in the shape of a hand, and it had nine or ten round holes in it. Each hole had a number. A ring card, she called it. Did *you* ever see one, Lucy?"

"Of course I did," she snapped. "For taking the measure of a girl's ring finger!"

"That's right," he said, surprised. "I never saw one till then. That's why I took it up in my hand." He shook his head. "That's where I made my mistake. I see now it was stupid of me, but I held it out and asked her to show me how it worked. She started to put her finger into the little holes, one after the other, till she came to the one that was right for her. 'That's my fit now,' she said, and she laughed and held up her finger with the card dangling from it."

When he came to this point of his story, Sam was overcome. "Oh, Lucy, wasn't I unfortunate!" he cried. "At that minute, the door opened and two young women came into the shop. I only know them by sight, but Mona knows them well. One was the new manageress in the Railway Hotel. It appears that two worse gossips you couldn't have found. 'They'll have it all over the town we're engaged, Sam,' said Mona when they went out."

"You didn't believe her!"

"Well, I did and I didn't," he said miserably. "She was very upset. She began to cry."

A tremendous relief had come over Lucy. It was so great she began to laugh.

But Sam didn't laugh. "Oh, it's not funny, Lucy," he said. "She could be compromised, it seems. She said those two wouldn't rest till they'd spread their story all over the town."

"Ah, for heaven's sake!" she cried impatiently. "Who'd believe a story like that!"

"Didn't you believe it, Lucy?" he said dolefully. "And if you did, what can we expect from other people? I'm afraid I've put myself in a very tight corner," he said taking out his handkerchief and wiping his forehead.

She stared at him. "You don't mean to say you'd con-

template—" But she couldn't trust herself to utter the word "marriage." "That you'd contemplate going ahead with this nonsense?"

For a minute he said nothing. "I wouldn't want to do anything dishonorable, Lucy," he said then.

"As if you could, Sam! Why, everybody knows you!" It was on the point of her tongue to add that everyone knew it was with *her* he was in love! But she swallowed the words. "If you ask me," she said, "it looks as if she was out from the start to catch you."

"Oh, hush, hush, Lucy," he said. "She didn't think anyone would come into the shop—it was nearly closing time. I was just going to give her a hand to put up the shutters. She has too much to do in that shop, I know. And she's not very strong, either, I'd say."

"Well, she doesn't look delicate to me!" said Lucy. Was he in the habit of helping with those shutters, she wondered.

But Sam was scrupulously considering her remark. "Oh, I don't mean she's *delicate*," he said. "Just not strong."

There was a long pause. "Ah, well, what does that matter, one way or another—to you, I mean?" she said at last, in a low voice.

"Oh, it could matter a lot," he said meditatively, "later on."

To her utter amazement, she realized that he was thinking of marriage. "Well, it seems she has no fears for herself in that respect if she's so determined to get a man," she said vindictively.

"Oh, don't be hard, Lucy," he said. "After all, it's a natural instinct in a woman. And there's another thing—I think maybe she's had a soft spot for me for a long time past."

"And that would excuse her, I suppose!"

This time, he didn't notice the bitterness. "She's a very decent girl," he added quickly. "A man could do worse."

In the face of that, how could she say other than she did. "More luck to her so!" she said. "And you, too! I wish you joy of each other." And she turned on her heel and went into the house.

"Well?" said Louise and Bay, who had seen them through the gable window.

"It's true," she said. "He's just told me."

And so, in a way, it was she who put the seal on the engagement. What was more, for all her high spirits and her shining looks, from that moment she took a back seat in life. The strange thing was, though, that on the day Mona died it seemed that she'd been given back, in an instant, her lost role. She was once more what she had been—a romantic figure, tantalizing, unpredictable. And now, with her nieces and nephews growing up around, she had a larger audience than ever. Clearly, this renewal of her affair with Sam had them all on tenterhooks.

"You wouldn't think of marrying him, Lucy?" her sisters cried in consternation.

They didn't seem to give a thought to her age. Not even the nieces and nephews. It was of Sam *they* were doubtful. "He must be an old fellow by now, Aunt Lucy," they said.

"He's the same age as me!" she said dryly.

"But when did you see him last?" they persisted.

"Not for years," she admitted, and she laughed. "He may be bald for all I know!" She was determined to take everything in good part. "Would you like to see a picture of him?" she asked, remembering an old faded photo that had been taken on an outing of the Temperance Society. They were all in it—herself, and Louise, and Bay, and several others, of course, too, and, in the middle of them, Sam. She hadn't looked at it for years. "How young we all were!" she exclaimed, glancing at it before showing it to the young people.

But they were looking at the clothes, not at the faces. The clothes looked a million years old. "Which is Sam?" they asked.

"In the middle! See!"

They looked closer. "Oh, Aunt Lucy, I thought you were joking! He *is* bald!"

That annoyed her a bit. "How could he be bald then stupid? That was when we were young."

"His hair must have been very fine, if so," one of them said, peering.

"It was very, very fine," she said, trying to be patient. "It was as soft as a child's."

"Oh, Aunt Lucy—you're blushing!" they squealed. "Aunt Lucy's blushing!"

It would have been just like the old days, the teasing and the innuendoes, if Louise hadn't damped them down. "I must say this conversation is in very bad taste," she said. "His wife is only a week dead!"

Involuntarily, Lucy corrected her. "Two weeks," she said.

The young people giggled. Louise glared. "Don't tell me you are counting the days!" she said.

It was only then Lucy realized that it wasn't at all the same as in the old days. Of course, they didn't know the full story. They didn't know how Sam had been tricked into that first marriage! She'd never told a living soul. She was just about to tell them when it occurred to her that it would be a betrayal of him. Already, even then, her loyalties seemed to engage her less to them than to him.

If anything *were* to crop up again between Sam and herself, it would hardly suit *them*! It would suit them nicely to have her there—where she always was—in the old home. The house was hers, of course, by her mother's will, as the sole surviving single one of the family. But what was it worth? Nothing. Riddled with woodworm and flaking with dry rot, it wouldn't fetch a penny if it were to be sold. On the other hand, the site might well become very valuable in time to come. At some future date, they or their children might benefit from what she now had to preserve at such cost. Only for her, it would have fallen down long ago. It wasn't just the upkeep and maintenance but the rates and taxes as well! And meanwhile they came and went as they pleased. Bay and Louise ran in and out as if they'd never left home. To observe the formalities never occurred to them. It was the same with the rest. Even the ones that had left the town came back occasionally—for their holidays, or to pass a weekend. And as for the children! It was a regular holiday home for those children: so safe, and free of charge. And when they grew up, the children, too, made their own of the place. Such an excellent place to study—quiet, dull. Such an excellent place to recuperate after an illness or an

operation. A regular nursing home, that's what it was on occasion—somewhere to put up their feet, with someone to dance attendance upon them. Selfish to the core, every one of them. But she'd never really seen it clearly until this matter of Sam arose. What she found contemptible was that they should begin their campaign against him so far in advance of events. For although she, too, thought it likely that Sam might come back to her, it did not cross her mind that he would make a move until Mona was a year dead—or until the year was nearly out.

But one night two weeks later, when there was a knock on her door, she knew it was him! She had the house to herself for once. Not that that made much difference—it might as well have had walls of glass from the way Louise and Bay knew all that went on in it. And, indeed, within five minutes of his stepping off the train they knew about it. He had no sooner stepped out of the door to catch the train back than again the lot of them were down on top of her. Had they no shame?

That, however, was what they were saying about her. "No shame, no shame at all," they intoned as they came in the door.

"What are you talking about?" she cried. "What more natural than that he would turn to us in his bereavement?"

"To us? To you! He had to pass my house to come here!" cried Louise.

"And mine!" cried Bay.

"What did he have to say, anyway?" they demanded.

For a minute, she didn't answer. Instead, she walked over to the mirror and stared into it. Aware of them huddled behind her, she stared into the glass. Well, she had more looks left than they—any of them—could lay claim ever to have had at all! With this knowledge, she felt her old power over them returning. And she remembered something. In the old days, they never knew what to make of her—that was what used to drive them mad. "Wouldn't you like to know!" she said.

"You might have spared a thought for us," they said, "and not set the town by the ears!"

"You'd think it was *me* went up to Dublin to see *him*!"

"That wouldn't have been as bad," they said. Louise and Bay were beside themselves. "He could have written and arranged to meet you somewhere, and not make a laughingstock of us all!"

One of the children had to intervene. "Anyone would think he'd popped the question! He only came down to feel his way—isn't that right, Aunt Lucy?"

If they only knew. For when she'd opened the door to him, his first words were an apology—not for his haste but his tardiness! "This was the earliest I could come down, Lucy," he'd said as he stepped inside, and her timid expression of sympathy was immediately absorbed into his own exclamations, as he took off his coat and hat and laid them on top of the piano. "A terrible thing, death! A terrible thing, Lucy," he said, "Leaves the living half dead, too. I was sick, actually sick—would you believe that?—on the day she was taken to the chapel, let alone on the day of the funeral. The confusion! You've no idea what it was like. We had a good maid, fortunately for me—a very decent girl, too; she couldn't have felt it more if she was one of the family, but that only made matters worse, because whenever she came across something belonging to Mona she started to scream and cry. She hasn't got over it yet, indeed. She misses her a great deal, because although she's a great worker, she's lost without someone to tell her what to do. Too slow; no method! Do you know what time I got my lunch today? Three o'clock. It's a wonder I caught the train this evening. I've been trying to get down all week."

The ease and familiarity with which he ran on was amazing. There was no constraint between them.

"You're looking well, Lucy," he said practically, as he sat down. And then, without putting a tooth in it, he gave his reason for coming. "I'm not going to let you slip a second time, you know."

It seemed only proper to pretend she didn't understand, but he caught her eye, and she felt her face redden.

He looked at her fondly. "We can't afford to misunderstand one another again, Lucy. We haven't the whole of life before us, now, that we can be prodigal of it."

It was so true she was disarmed. "All the same," she murmured, "it's very soon to talk about it."

He stood up and moved nearer to her. "What's the difference between talking about it and thinking about it?" he said softly. "You never ceased to have your niche in my heart, Lucy. You must know that. I never pretended otherwise to anyone. And what more natural than my thoughts would turn to you—run to you—when I was free again. To whom else would I turn? Aren't you nearer to me now than any living soul?"

It was what she felt herself, and yet she was troubled by feelings of sadness and regret. "Oh, Sam, if we could be young again!"

But he shook his head. "This was the way it was ordained," he said, and somehow instantly the words, though trite, put everything into perspective. The years between past and present were reduced to scale at last, and his marriage put in its proper place—a mere incident in his romance with her. "Oh, Lucy. Oh, Lucy," he said. "We need happiness more now than we needed it when we were young."

That was true, too. So true.

"Be kind to me, Lucy," he said, almost in a whisper. "I need kindness badly."

"Oh, Sam!" she said, and it was as if it was her heart and not her voice that spoke.

"It's yes?" he cried, and he took her hand in a clasp that was gentle but experienced, and she felt that any effort to withdraw it would be hopelessly inadequate. He sensed her reluctance, though. "Still afraid to take the plunge, dear?" he said softly. "There's nothing to be timid about—I'm an old hand at the game now, and even if I do say it myself, I made one woman happy, anyway. I don't see why I shouldn't do the same again. Well?" he said.

Lucy's head reeled. She had to gain time. "I never offered you any refreshment after your journey, Sam!" she cried. She made a move toward the door. "You'll have a cup of tea—or something?"

With one hand he still detained her, but with the other he managed to pull out his watch. It was the same old-fashioned turnip type he'd always had. "I won't have time," he said. "I'll have to be leaving for the station in a few minutes. Next time, I'll try and get down earlier. I

had only one purpose on this occasion. Quickly! Tell me, Lucy—are you going to make me a happy man again?"

"But you say you'll come down again, Sam! Can't we talk about it the next time?"

His big silver timepiece might be the same, but Sam himself had changed. His watch and his mouth clicked shut with the same finality. "I'm not asking you to name the day," he said. "Only to give me your promise."

Since she still presumed there wouldn't be any question of marrying until the year was out, she might have agreed there and then were it not for a silly scruple. If she gave her promise, might he not think fit to kiss her? And would *that* be seemly, or indeed—?

But he'd whipped out his watch again. "Let me decide for us both," he said. "There's no time to be lost." And then—as she deemed he would—he leaned forward and kissed her. It was, however, the quickest of kisses; it wouldn't disturb a mouse. "It's settled!" he said, and he snatched up his hat. "I must make tracks!"

Well! After he'd gone, she leaned back against the hall stand, and her impulse was to giggle like a girl, not knowing that her sisters were already on their way down the street, about to break in on her with their strictures.

Not that she heeded them. On the contrary, their concern for themselves was so great it had many any concern for them on her part utterly superfluous. She need consider only herself—and, of course, Sam. And on his next visit she told him this. "I don't mind what the family say, Sam." But she had other scruples. "It's not of them I'm thinking," she said. "After all, they cannot say much if we wait till the year is out—" As Sam seemed about to interrupt her, she put up her hand. "Wait a minute, Sam," she said. "Let me explain. I'm not upset by what anyone can say—it's . . ." When it came to the point, however, she just couldn't tell him.

But he knew. "It's of Mona you're thinking, isn't it?" he asked gently.

Gratefully, she nodded her head.

"Listen, Lucy," he said kindly but carefully. "Listen to me. Mona would be the first to understand. She would be the first to want me to be happy—happy and well cared for. Do you know what I was thinking today while I was

waiting for my meal to be served up to me?" As he saw the sympathetic inquiry in her eye, he broke off to answer it. "Oh, indeed yes, the same story—after three when I got it. And if you saw it when it came!" He shuddered. "Uneatable. Poor girl, she does her best, but she lacks direction—she can't be blamed. But what's this I was saying? Oh, yes. I was saying that while I was sitting there waiting for my meal to be dished up, and knowing well how unappetizing it would be—ice cold, the chop stuck to the plate—I thought to myself that it would break Mona's heart if she could see me. And do you know what else I thought, Lucy? I thought that Heaven couldn't be Heaven for her if she were able to look down in that moment at me!" For a moment, he closed his eyes. Then, opening them wide, he looked bravely on a new day of thought. "God surely spares them such sights," he said.

It was certainly comforting to think so. All the same, she felt guilty, and she said so. "I do, Sam," she whispered.

He took her hand. "Guilty for what, Lucy? Is it for the past?"

She felt like laughing. "Oh no, no," she cried. "For now. I feel I'm taking you away from her."

He was so wise. "Aren't you only taking me back?" he said. "As for her, it was God who took her away from me."

Gentle, and yet discriminating. How could she but trust him? But he was looking at his watch. It couldn't be train time already? "Oh no, no," he said reassuringly. "It's just that time flies, and we have a lot to arrange. First, let me put your mind finally at rest about poor Mona. Let me tell you, Lucy, that she urged me to marry again." He nodded his head and lowered his voice. "She spoke of it just before the end! I won't repeat her exact words—such things are sacred—but you can rest assured we have her blessing on what we are about to do." He closed his eyes again, this time as if in prayer, and when he opened them it was briskly, as one rises from prayer strengthened to take a new command of things. "We have nothing to fear from our consciences," he said. "Tell me about your fam-

ily. Did I understand you to say when you opened the door that they have been causing you anxiety?"

Although it was really the other way round, Lucy nodded.

Sam frowned. "They could give a lot of annoyance," he said, "unless—that is to say, unless we go about things the right way."

Thinking there could be no ambiguity in a truism, Lucy agreed happily.

"What we must do," said Sam, "is spring it upon them!" Then, before she had time to say anything, he snapped his fingers. "Why tell them at all, for that matter!" he cried. "I could have a word with the priest and get things arranged quietly. Then I could slip down the night before on the late train—"

She was speechless. She couldn't possibly have said anything, yet distinctly he appeared to listen.

"Ah, you're right," he said, exactly as if she had spoken. "You're right, Lucy. It wouldn't do. The town is too full of gossips. Our little secret would be common property in five minutes. No, we'll have to think of something else." He pondered for a minute. "You could come up to Dublin and we could be married up there!" But almost at once he shook his head. "No, no. That wouldn't do either. You'd want to be married here, in your own parish. It's quite natural! For sentiment's sake. It's different, perhaps, for me, but I'm able to put myself in your place. There will be enough that will be strange to you." He pondered again. "I'll tell you what we'll do," he said, and she had only time to notice in passing that the conditional mood had given way to the future positive. "I will come down on the evening train"—and this time he was so confident his solution was right that he winked at her—"but I won't come all the way," he said, and, pleased with his little ruse, he winked again. "I'll get off at a small station somewhere up the line, and in the morning I'll hire a car and come across country just in time for the ceremony. You will only have to walk up the street as if there was nothing at all afoot. And then—before anyone gets wind of it, the deed will be done!"

Lucy was stunned. "Do you mean elope?"

"Elope?" It was a word Sam himself hadn't heard for

years, but, seeing how it brought the light into Lucy's eyes, he repeated it. "Elope, that's it!" he said.

"And who'd tell them—my family?" she asked, doubtful in spite of a rising excitement.

"We can tell them ourselves when the deed is done," Sam said. "There's only Louise and Bay in the town, isn't that all? We can walk around and confront them—beard them in their dens!"

Lucy laughed guiltily. "Arm in arm!" she said.

"That's the idea," said Sam. "Let them lump it or like it. And as for the ones in America, well, we needn't think about them. It can't matter to them one way or another. Nor the ones in Dublin, either, although they can be told in the same way as the ones down here. We can walk around and call on them that night if it isn't too late when we get there."

"To Dublin? Is that where we'll go?" She'd given no thought at all to the honeymoon. In the old days, honeymoons were mostly spent in Kilkee or Tramore. "Is it to Dublin we'd go?" she repeated.

Sam had given no thought to the matter, either. He was sobered by his omission. "I've taken a lot of time off lately, I'm afraid," he said, "with one thing and another—when she was ill, I mean, and later for the funeral. I'd find it a bit awkward to ask for more time in so short a space. But wait a minute!" he cried. He really was resourceful. "We're forgetting that it will be all new to you—the house, I mean. The house will be a change, anyway. It's a nice little house, snug and dry."

He made it sound so like a nest Lucy had to smile.

"That's my girl!" he said approvingly. "I knew you'd take the right attitude. And let me tell you something. Honeymoons are overrated. Believe you me! I can give you my solemn assurance on that. What is more, I have yet to meet the married couple that hasn't the same to say. That's one part of the business with which they'd dispense if they had to do it over again. Yes, take it from me—grossly overrated! I have no hesitation at all in asking for your trust on this point, Lucy! None whatever."

"Will I not see it so still, till afterward—the house, I mean?" she asked timidly, trying hard not to sound doubtful.

"Isn't that best, don't you think?" He was very cheerful. "It's in good order. You've nothing to worry about on that score. You'll have nothing to do but walk in the door. Not only is it fully fitted, fully equipped, but as I'll only be one night gone from it, it will be well aired into the bargain." Remembering that in this respect Lucy did not know what she was being spared, he threw up his eyes in token of his own past experience. Then he lowered them to rest gently on her. "I can only say that it's no more than we deserve, Lucy—after our long wait. Our long, long wait," he repeated, and he sighed. "Lucy, you're not going to make it much longer, are you?"

"Oh, Sam!" He made her feel so dilatory that she looked anxiously at the calendar on the wall behind his back. "Lent begins next month," she said. "We'll have to wait till after that, anyway."

But Sam had whisked the calendar off its nail and was examining it. "Unless we hustle and get it over *before* Lent," he said. "I don't see what there is to stop us, do you?"

And so one day in early February, with a bunch of snowdrops pinned to her lapel, Lucy became a bride.

"Let me do that, Lucy. You might strain yourself," admonished Sam, as he took her dressing case and put it up with the other suitcases on the luggage rack of the train. Doing so, he looked tenderly at her. "It wasn't such an ordeal after all, was it?" he asked, and he leaned across and patted her on the knee. "You look bewildered," he said, and he laughed. "Well, cheer up, love, it's all over now."

Bewildered she was. More than the ceremony seemed to have ended. What, for instance, was she to make of her family's new attitude toward her? Had they got wind of things in advance, or what, that they should have taken her news so coolly? What had happened to their fears of a scandal? Above all, what had become of their concern for themselves? Now it was only of her they thought.

"Well, it's your own business, Lucy," said Louise, almost as soon as she'd opened the door to them, when they went round, arm in arm, after the wedding. She

hadn't given them time to open their mouths. One look and she guessed. Their being together at that hour of the day may have made the telling superfluous, of course. And then there was her bunch of snowdrops. And oh yes, oh yes, Sam had a snowdrop in his buttonhole.

Bay wasn't surprised, either. "It was more or less what I expected," she said when Louise's youngest had been sent up the street to inform her and bring her down. "I hope you'll be happy," she added.

"Oh, naturally we *all* hope that," said Louise.

And later, when Lucy and Sam were in the train and the family was standing on the platform, Bay's parting words were not the most encouraging. "You must make the best of it now!" she called out as the train began to slide away from the platform.

"We're off!" cried Sam, and although he urged her to lean out and wave to them, she had barely time to raise her hand once when the railway bridge snuffed them out. There was nothing to do after that but settle into her seat. Sam remained standing. Closing the window, he turned his attention to the luggage. "I'll fold our coats and put them on top of the cases, out of the way," he said.

His back was to her. But anyway she hardly heard him. Her mind still echoed with her sister's words. "*I hope you know what you're doing.*" Did she know what she was doing? What *had* she done? Had she, in her endeavor to hide her intention from others, hidden it in part from herself as well? She stared out the carriage window. The flat fields through which they were traveling were familiar to her still, but field by field they were being flung back to either side as if flung out of existence. "Oh, Sam, did we do right?" she whispered.

Sam's mind, however, was on the overcoats. It was a mistake to have turned them inside out. With their slippery silk linings, they kept sliding off the rack. He had to stand up again and take them down and turn them right side out before he put them back. "That's better," he said contentedly, surveying them once more before he sat down. But he'd heard her. "It's funny you should say that," he said then. "Mona asked me that same question. In the same circumstances, too. But she had cause to ask

Poor Mona! There was a little cloud on *her* happiness!" He sighed.

"A cloud? What was it?" she asked in dismay.

"Because she was very tenderhearted," said Sam. He made a discreet sign of the cross. On the opposite seat, Lucy felt obliged to do the same. "She was never able to enjoy her own happiness if it cast any shadow over another."

In the past few weeks, Lucy had heard many references to Mona, but somehow she'd never really thought about her. For that matter, she hadn't thought about her for years. Sam and Mona were married almost immediately after the bogus episode of the engagement ring, and Lucy had taken care to be away at the time of the wedding; she went to Lisdoonvarna for several weeks, although it wasn't the best time of year for the spa. And when she came back, people had the grace not to speak about them to her. Then perhaps the fact that they had no children made it seem after a time as if they had passed out of existence. But in the train, when Sam spoke of her, Lucy suddenly pictured Mona again, as she must have been on the morning of her wedding trip. It might have been on this same train that they took their departure. It could have been in this very carriage they traveled! Perhaps on this very seat Mona, too, had sat! Suddenly she leaned forward. "Sam, would you like to change places?" she cried.

"But why?" Sam asked.

"Well, some people say it's bad to sit with your back to the engine," she said. "It could make you sick."

Sam was just about to cross his feet contentedly. "Not me," he said. "But I'll change with you all the same if you like."

"Please, Sam!" she said faintly.

When they'd changed seats, he looked at her with a worried expression. "Do you feel better now?" he asked. "Mind you, Mona liked to face the engine, too, although I always think it's better to feel sick than to get a cinder in your eye."

"You mean she sat on this side?"

"Yes, always on that side," said Sam amiably, "unless the carriage was crowded. In which case—"

But the train roared through a tunnel just then, and Lucy couldn't hear. What did it matter anyway, she asked herself, and she was prepared to think about something else when they flashed out into the open again. From either side, the green fields rushed toward her, but it was the green fields of life that had rushed toward Mona. It was all very well to say that in the old days Mona couldn't hold a candle to her, but what figure would she cut now if placed by the side of that green young girl? Fresh apprehensions chilled her, and she forgot that for Sam those early memories of Mona had long been overlaid by others, less exciting. By a strange transference, she began to think of Sam as young and green, too. I must look awful, she thought, putting up her hand nervously to her hair, to her forehead, to her cheek. She hadn't slept well the night before, and she wasn't used to early rising. She must be a sight. She didn't dare look in a mirror.

As if he were a mirror, however, Sam at that moment gave her back her reflection. "You look a bit tired," he said, and then he sighed. "Mona failed a lot in late years," he said. "She looked very badly toward the end."

Lucy looked at him fixedly. To talk about Mona was hardly the best cure for her at that moment, but it might be better than thinking about her. "I never saw her again," she said. "Not after . . ."

She didn't need to finish the sentence. He nodded understandingly. "She was strong enough, you know," he said, easily conversational. "I used to think she wasn't, but I was wrong. She was able for plenty of hard work. There was no doubt of that. We hadn't much money in the early days, and she worked hard to save every penny. I often went to bed at night and left her downstairs, and do you know what she'd be at? Glazing my collars, or waxing my shoes. I had no control over her when it came to work. But"—he sighed deeply—"in the end she got pulled down by those pregnancies."

Lucy started.

"Didn't you know?" said Sam, seeing her surprise. "She had four or five miscarriages. She did indeed. And it nearly broke her heart. It was a real cross. She'd have been a good mother, just as she was a good wife, but it was not to be, it seems." He shook his head. "Many

time, I came home from work and found her sitting in the dark, brooding over it. I used to do my best to console her, but it was no use. I used to tell her that she *was* a mother. Time and again, I'd tell her that. 'You *are* a mother, Mona,' I'd say. That her children never came to full term did not deprive her of that title! But she was inconsolable. You see, Lucy, it wasn't of herself she was thinking but of me." His voice dropped. "The most unselfish of women. Do you know what she said to me one day? She said that if she'd known that she'd never give me a family, she wouldn't have married me at all. Can you imagine anything more unselfish! To think that she could bring herself to wish another woman in her place."

Taken out of herself for a minute, Lucy listened. "Oh, but she couldn't have meant it, Sam," she protested.

Sam shook his head. "Indeed she did—you'd no notion of her depth. And what is more, Lucy, it was you she was thinking about at the time."

That was too much. "Oh, no!" she cried, putting her two hands up to her face. It was one thing to know that she had held her place in his heart. It was another thing altogether for Mona to know it. "She didn't mention me by name, Sam!"

"Well, maybe not on that occasion," said Sam piously. "She had great delicacy," he added. "But I may as well tell you your name was not unmentioned in our home. She often spoke of you, especially in our early days, because"—and here he leaned forward—"you see, she knew she'd only come second with me. Ah, yes, Lucy, your name was a household word with us in the early days of our marriage. Indeed, it became a kind of joke in the end. Ah, don't be offended. It was a playful little joke; there was no harm in it. Ah, there was a rare quality in Mona, that she could turn the tragic into the comic. In her place, another woman would surely have nourished bitterness against you, especially when she remembered what you were in those days, because—that's another thing!—she was fully aware of how much better looking you were than her. I often heard her say that beauties like you were no longer to be seen." He shook his head and sighed deeply this time. For a moment, Lucy thought it was for the passing of that beauty he

sighed, but it was not. "Ungrudging!" he said. "Generous-hearted! That was her!" And to her dismay he took out his handkerchief. But when he unfolded it, it appeared it was only to blow his nose. "Her unselfishness was never more in evidence than at the end," he said then. "When she felt the end was near, again it was not of herself but of me she was thinking. She couldn't bear the thought of me being neglected. Do you know, Lucy, one day when I went into the hospital I had a button missing off my waistcoat, and when she saw it the tears ran down her face. 'You can't say but I always had you well turned out, Sam,' she said. 'I can't bear to think you'd ever be otherwise.' It was on that day she made me promise I wouldn't let any thought of her stand in my way if I saw fit to marry again. But I told you that, didn't I?" he asked, suddenly anxious.

Something of the sort he had undoubtedly said, but she certainly had not understood she had been specifically designated by Mona to take her place. It was one thing to think of Mona's benisons vaguely showering down from Heaven; it was quite another to think of her dispensing them from her deathbed. Acquiescence from above seemed right and proper and in keeping with the supernatural state; from a hospital bed it seemed like a subtle accusation. "She didn't really mean me?" she cried.

She looked at him. Was this the constancy to which she had clung? Like the moon, it had two faces: on one side hers, and on the other Mona's. But which to which was shown? If Mona had to live with anecdotes about her, what would it be like for Lucy in a few hours' time, when she'd be boxed up in Mona's house? Suddenly she felt faint. She'd have to get out in the corridor for some air. But she didn't want him to come with her. She got to her feet. "Will you hand me down my small case, Sam," she said. "I think I'll have a wash." That ought to keep him from following her.

But he hadn't thought of doing so, and after he'd put up a hand to assist her he settled back in his seat. "Remind me to tell you something when you come back," he said patiently. "A nice little thought that came into my head."

Impatiently, she stood in the doorway. "Tell me now!" she said.

But he'd taken out his watch and was looking at it, and then he glanced out of the window. "My little plan would depend on what time we arrived in Dublin," he said, "and on whether or not there was any daylight left."

Suddenly she knew what was in his mind. "Where is she buried?" she asked, and her voice in her own ears sounded like lead.

But his face lit up, and she saw that he marveled at her intuition and what he took to be another affinity between them. "You had the same thought! That would mean twice as much to her." But there was a draft from the open door. "We'll talk about it when you return," he said affably, "and I'll tell you a little incident that happened six or seven years ago. You'll find it very touching, I know."

Oh, no! You won't! she thought, as emphatically as if she'd spoken. She got out into the corridor, and almost ran in her anxiety to get far away from him. The train was traveling fast. The noise of the wheels was deafening, and several times she would have been thrown from one side to the other if she hadn't steadied herself against the rattling woodwork, now of a window and now of a door. The train seemed to be crowded, although in their first-class carriage she and Sam had sat in state. But finally she came on a carriage with only one young couple occupying a corner. Not noticing that the floor was strewn with confetti, she was about to take refuge there when, outraged, the man sprang up and slapped the blind down in her face.

Tears rushed into her eyes. But what did it matter where she went? Sam would eventually miss her and come to look for her. If only the train would stop, she could get off! She glanced out of the window. It was getting dark outside, but the fields between the darkening hedges were pale with a thin mist that seeped up from the ground. If the train stopped for even a minute, she could jump down and stumble across the line and lose herself in that bright but concealing mist. She could imagine herself coming to a stand, out of breath, in time to watch the lighted train move forward again without her. She would

see the carriages slide past one by one, till in one of them, sitting foolishly waiting, would be Sam. But the train wouldn't stop till it got to its destination. If she wanted to get off, she'd have to throw herself out. Involuntarily, she glanced at the door handle. It was green with verdigris around the stem, but the lever itself shone bright from handling. She'd only have to press it down—Quickly, she clapped her hands into her pockets as if to save them from some act for which they alone would be responsible. She wasn't as unbalanced as all that! But she had begun to tremble, and the thought of continuing on to the end of the journey was unbearable. And that house! To think of facing it cluttered with all its paraphernalia of another woman's life!

"I've left everything as it was, Lucy," he'd said. "You'll know better how to dispose of her little possessions than me."

Her little possessions? What did that mean? Presses full of clothes? Chests of drawers stuffed with every kind of rubbish! Boxes, portmanteaus, little cubbyholes here and there filled with God knows what junk! She'd known enough of Mona to guess she'd been a great one for finery and gewgaws of all kinds!

Gewgaws? A frantic thought came to her. Her wedding ring! Where had he got it? During the ceremony, he had clapped it on her finger so fast it was as if he had handcuffed her to him, but it was very thick—thicker than wedding rings were in the present day—and now, looking closer, she saw it had at the same time a worn look. Was it possible that it was not new? She shuddered. And her engagement ring? She'd known it was not new, and she remembered being surprised at the alacrity with which he'd produced it the moment he'd broken down her scruples. He'd pulled it out of his pocket, where, loose as a pebble, it had rattled around among his keys and his coins. That, she'd supposed, was why there was dust in the crevices of the setting. She hadn't washed it, because the setting looked so insecure. But now, examining it, too, very closely, she saw that it was grime, not dust, that clogged the claw. Feeling sick, she went to drag the rings off her finger. But they were a tight fit and her finger was swollen. It swelled more when she tugged at them, but

she went on dragging until the skin broke and it began to bleed. The sight of the blood steadied her for a minute. If she were to pull at them till she bared the bone, what difference would it make? For that matter, what difference would it make if she did get the rings off? If she threw them out the window, it would not alter her situation. It would have been to more purpose to have thrown herself out!

Insidiously, when it came again, this thought was less alien. A strange excitement made a vein in her throat throb, and at the same time it seemed that the train was gathering speed crazily, like a train derailed. The rattling carriages careered after each other, but every now and then they veered slightly as if they would unlock their couplings and fly asunder. If at that moment she were to press the door handle, she knew exactly what would happen. In an instant, the door would be dragged out of her hand and with a violent clatter let fly back on its hinges, or wrenched from them. Caught in the great current of air that traveled as fast as the train itself, it might be minutes before it fell to the ground—perhaps not until the train had passed and the line was empty and silent again. And what about her? Snatched from her feet, freed from all volition, she, too, would be caught up and sucked out into that rushing current. Like a bit of paper, she'd be blown away. She went nearer to the door. Heaven had never been easily imaginable, but it would be heaven to feel those rushing winds sprout like wings from her shoulder blades to uphold her and bear her through the air. To think that by a single act she might undo her folly and prove herself finally and forever to be what she had always been—a romantic figure.

But in her heart she knew it was too late. She was committed to being real at last. Sam had committed her. It was a long way back, but she'd have to go. She'd have to stumble along the train till she came to the carriage where she'd left him sitting; she'd have to open the door and go in and sit down by his side. That she must do.

She began to go slowly back along the corridors. After a few minutes, she came to the compartment occupied by the lovers. The blind was up, though—it must have snapped up unnoticed by them. Tired of kissing and in-

different to gapers, they sat hand in hand, staring in front of them. And although they didn't care this time, she averted her face and hurried on, looking outward to where on the other side of her the fields should have been. But now against the glass only darkness pressed. Like a backing of mercury, it had made the windows into mirrors. And in one of those windows, sitting patiently waiting for her, she saw Sam—asleep. He was having a little nap, which wasn't to be wondered at, because Sam was tired and Sam was old.

Poor Sam, she thought, and her heart softened. What if he did meander on about Mona! He'd earned the right to it. He had learned a larger love than she knew anything about. "Sam!" she said, stepping into the carriage.

With a start, he jerked his head up. He had been in a sound sleep, but he spoke immediately, as if out of his thoughts. She didn't at once catch what he said. Does he know which of us it is at all, she wondered—Mona or me? And she tried not to mind. But Sam at that moment repeated what he had said.

"Poor fellows!" That was what he'd said. "Poor fellows." And she realized with a start that not only was it of her he was thinking, and of the past, but that, in particular, he was thinking of the swains that had swarmed around her in those days, and whom he had after all bested. Little did he ever think he'd do it, with nothing to recommend him but his heart of gold.

A Blue Blonde in the Sky
over Pennsylvania

Dennis Lynds

JOHN CASHMORE lay on his side in bed. He watched the moving pattern on his bedroom floor made by the early morning sunlight through the leaves of the old oak outside his window. Connecticut, he said to himself, is lousy with old oaks. If there was one thing Connecticut had it was old oaks. Very good to sit under in the early sunlight on spring mornings. Only no one sat under trees on a Thursday except bums and children. Not in Connecticut.

"You look like you slept on nails," his wife said.

Wide awake and dressed, she came into his bedroom carrying his morning cup of tea. She raised the window shade all the way and the sunlight flooded against his eyes.

He said, "Do you enjoy blinding me?"

"Drink your tea. Bad day yesterday?"

"Since I didn't come home until eleven-thirty that's a pretty stupid question. We planned Chicago. Expense accounts again." He sipped the hot tea and watched the sky outside his window. "God! I thought all that would be over once I made department head, but it goes on and on."

She sat on the foot of his bed. "Get another job. You could get a hundred jobs."

"Where?"

"Anywhere! Look."

"Another job would be just the same," he said.

She said, "I think you just need something to be angry about."

"Thanks," he said.

She said, "Let's start all over. Good morning."

He smiled to her. A tall woman who was going grey, and her body was smoothly solid. She stood and walked to the window. With her short hair and thickened body she seemed shorter than she was. If she lost fifteen pounds, he estimated, she would still look a little like the girl he had married.

"It is a lovely day," she said. "You know, I think that Sears boy is home again. The Army must be getting very lenient. That boy spends more time at home than he does in camp. Thank God you missed all that."

"Good thing for Mary I missed all that, might not be here at all."

"What a thing to say."

"Let's try for another right now."

"Come on, now, you'll miss your train."

"I forgot, it's not Saturday night."

She picked up his empty tea cup. "If that's all you want find a chorus girl."

"I wonder if you'd mind at all?"

"I'll start your shower," she said. "And I would mind."

"Sorry. It was last night."

In the shower the hot water washed down his body. He shut his eyes as if in a shell of thick warmth. Wrapped in warmth and carried far away into a liquid world where he felt he would never have to move or open his eyes. The shock of the cold water made him clench his teeth. But he forced himself to stay under until he had counted twenty-five. Once he had made it a rule to stay under the cold water until he had counted his age, but that was going too far now. When he was dry, he dressed and went downstairs to breakfast.

"Dad," his son Johnny said, "go to a new hotel, okay? I already got two Chicago postcards."

"You *have* two Chicago cards," his wife corrected.

"Have," his son said, "will you Dad?"

"All right," he said.

His daughter said, "You'll be back for the dance, won't you? It's Sunday, I said you'd chaperone."

"I'll be back," he said. "Who are you going with?"

"Freddie Sears, he's on furlough."

He poured a second cup of coffee. "Why don't you try

to find a boy who lives, say, half a mile away? You know, give the world a chance."

His wife said, "I like Freddie Sears."

"Sorry again," he said, "don't pay any attention to me."

When he left the house the sun was above the hills to the east across the valley. The whole valley seemed different because he had decided to walk down the hill. The sensation of walking in the warm spring air was pleasant, but the bright sun hurt his eyes. The last time he had walked regularly down the hill was during the war when it had been unpatriotic to ride too often. Now it was unpatriotic to walk. Detroit didn't approve. People looked at him from the windows. He remembered all the small flags with blue stars in the windows during the war. Faces instead of blue stars now, and he stopped at the last rise above the station to give all the faces a chance to see him so they could talk about it later. *The Cashmores' car must be busted.* Beyond the red-tile roof of the station, and beyond the many-colored roofs of the town, the white houses far across the valley on the opposite hill seemed to shine in the blue morning light like the houses of an Indian hill station or the forts of Moroccan sheiks. White houses like toys through the blue morning haze of the valley. He wondered if there was a man standing on the opposite hill gazing across at all the white houses on his hill.

On the train he read his newspaper carefully all the way in to Grand Central where he caught a taxi for Pennsylvania Station and the Chicago train. Charley Addison was waiting in their compartment. A big, red-faced man, Charley was the company's best salesman. Smoking a cigar, Charley began to complain about old J. J. and his penny-pinching ways before the train left the station.

"I tell you true, Johnny, I've about had it. I'm not used to that kind of kicking around. Not one damn, you know?"

"Why don't you get another job?"

"I've been keeping my eyes open, I kid you not."

The train emerged into the desolate smoke and marsh-land and dumps of the Jersey Flats. Here the sun was

thin and pale. Even spring was grey and cold on the desolation of the Flats.

He said, "Let's get going on the presentation."

"Already? Let's go to the club car for an eye-opener."

"Work now, play later," he said. "Start with the floor space figures, okay?"

"You're the boss," Charley said.

They were still working when the train passed through Philadelphia and turned west toward Pittsburgh.

2

The blonde was blue from the ribbon holding her long hair to the sharp points of her shoes. Pale blue eyes the color of the light Wedgwood dinner set he had brought his wife from London six years ago. A tight blue skirt and a powder blue cashmere sweater stretched by high breasts. He sat watching her. Charley was talking with her and with a young man who worked for Dupont. The sky outside the club car was a soft golden bronze of evening.

Charley was saying, ". . . that'll give us all Saturday to show you the town. How's it sound?"

"It's a straight offer," the blonde said.

Her narrow blue skirt projected like a canopy over the knee of her crossed leg. Long legs and smooth.

"The country's different out here," he said. "It's bigger. You feel it's part of a very big country. I don't feel that in Connecticut."

"Where do you live in Connecticut?" the blonde asked.

"No, let me guess. An old house, very comfortable. It's painted white and there's a lawn with trees all around."

"Something like that," he said.

She had straight, almost severe features that clashed with the soft smile she gave the waiter when he brought her Scotch and water. Charley and the young man from Dupont both reached for the check. The young man won. It gave him a pleasant feeling of power to let Charley reach for the checks. The young man from Dupont left too large a tip and the smiling waiter bobbed his head up and down like the Japanese spies in the old war movies on television.

"Television is going to raise a damned confused generation," he said to the blonde. "If they watch the new movies they'll love the Japanese and Germans, and hate the Chinese and Russians. If they watch the old movies on television they'll hate the Japanese and Germans, and love the Chinese and Russians."

"Is that bad?" the blonde asked.

"I suppose not. They might be so confused they'll wonder if war isn't pretty damned stupid."

Charley said, "Stupid is right. Four lousy years."

He said, "Charley started as a lieutenant and ended as a major. Infantry, too. Isn't that right, Charley?"

"Yeh, I was a hero," Charley said.

The young man from Dupont said, "I was in Europe. Sixty-sixth Division."

He sipped at his drink while they talked of a war he had known only as a gasoline shortage and too many trips to Washington. He would probably know the next one better. His son would not be as lucky as he had been, and the next one would probably end it for everyone. No more control over it than over the pale evening sunlight that cast a geometric pattern on the club car floor like the pattern of oak leaves on his bedroom floor that morning. And outside the train window the giant slag heaps of outer Pittsburgh steamed with waves of heat. In the black factory buildings small figures seemed to be dancing around the red flames of the blast furnaces that were brighter than the evening sun. Once, he saw a stream of white-hot steel pouring into glowing red molds on a flat car.

The blonde said, "It's beautiful in a way, isn't it?"

He nodded. "When I look at a steel mill I think that there are people really working, making something, changing the world. They must have a real sense of doing something."

"I don't expect they think about it," the blonde said.

"I guess not," he said.

In the dark Pittsburgh station misty rays of sun filtered down from the high ceiling. On the platform a man in grimy overalls waved to the blonde. She smiled and waved back. The man rolled his eyes up toward the station ceiling. The blonde laughed an open laugh that re-

minded him of his daughter laughing at a dance where she was enjoying herself. The man on the platform shrugged in mock despair and walked away to work somewhere on the train. And he could have been the man out there. A man wearing overalls and admiring a blonde through a train window. If his father had been a different man. If his father had been an immigrant worker instead of a minor executive in a construction company. Then he would have been a different man in a different job. A laborer, perhaps, instead of Director of Design for J. J. Salisbury & Co., Architects, New York. Of course he could have been something else if he had wanted to be something else but somehow the question of wanting to be something in particular had never come up except once when he was ten years old and had wanted to be a pirate. *A pirate*, his father had laughed, *Well now, that's a noble ambition, Johnny. A bit bloody, but definitely noble. The market's very limited, though. How about a second choice just in case?* His father had been such a big man then. A big, laughing giant. Later his father had become so small, and the joviality changed somehow to weakness and too much whisky. The big, friendly eyes became the confused eyes of a man who could never make a decision and was Assistant Purchasing Agent in the same construction company for twenty-two years. And there had been a blonde. A blonde little girl who clapped her hands and said she was going to be first mate on his pirate ship until he told her that girls could not go on a pirate ship. Then she screamed at him, *Pirates aren't real anyhow! I'm going to marry a doctor and have a big house and a butler and a trillion million dollars!* And that was the only time the question of wanting to be something special had ever come up that he could remember now. His mother analyzing, *I think architecture would be good, John. Your father still has influence in the building field. You have a flair for drawing anyway. Yes, architecture sounds right, don't you think?* That was the summer in Maine, just before he went up to Cornell. Nearly eighteen and he had still wanted to be a pirate only he had known enough not to mention that to his mother. Late in the season and almost alone in the deserted hotel. The wind cold on the open Maine coast. A few stray people

bundled in sweaters on the beaches. And a seventeen-year-old boy hidden high on a cold sand dune where the tall grass bent in the wind. A boy dreaming of a stormy sea and sails straining overhead and white water washing over him where he stood at the wheel of his ship.

"You're in a brown study," the blonde said.

He said, "Kids are crazy. In my day it was pirates, or Indians, or white hunters on safari. Today it's spacemen or underwater explorers."

"Children have a small world," she said.

"Or a big one," he said.

A train flashed past in the opposite direction. He realized that they had left Pittsburgh and were traveling across open countryside again. The sun was low and pale, and the faces of the people on the other train were white blurs. And all the faces on that other train were seeing him as a white blur flashing past and gone.

"Time to tie on the feed bag," Charley said. "Let's go."

"I suppose so," he said.

"Tell you what," Charley said, "how about a little pinochle after dinner? What say, George, join us?"

George was the young man from Dupont. "Thanks, I'd like to."

He said to the blonde, "Are you eating?"

"Not yet. I don't like to eat while it's still light, too much to see out there."

At dinner he let the other two talk and watched the countryside that was now the color of orange copper in the fading sunlight. The copper and blue haze of evening. The fields were copper, and the houses. The roads dark copper bordered by copper and blue trees that swayed in the evening breeze. The few people were small and black but with a copper sheen. People who seemed frozen immobile as the train passed their fields and homes. And above the houses and barns and fields and trees the body of the blonde in the club car lay soft and naked. Naked and copper and blue in the evening sky. And in the sky she moved and all her copper and blue skin seemed to shine like a rising moon.

"Now for some serious pinochle," Charley said.

He drank his coffee slowly. "You two start without me, I'll be along."

"You can't play two-handed pinochle," Charley said.

"Play canasta for a while," he said.

When he entered the club car the blonde was still sitting alone. In the chair on her right a heavy young man wearing a good grey suit watched her from the corner of his eye. The chair on her left was empty. He sat down.

"No card game?" she asked.

"Didn't feel much like it," he said. He looked for a waiter but the single attendant in the car did not seem to be able to see him. He said to the blonde, "What did you say you do?"

"Designer," she said. "Fashion and all that."

"So am I," he said, "buildings and all that."

She smiled. "We have something in common."

He felt her close beside him as if her body were covered with small fingers that reached and touched him. Perfume cascaded over him like the hot water this morning down his naked body. And he was conscious of his body as if he were in front of his bathroom mirror. He saw that her blue shoes had small blue bows on them.

"You're very beautiful," he said, "did you know?"

"Yes, I know, do you mind?"

He waved his arm toward the window. "It's all copper out there. In the sky I mean. And the houses."

He looked out the window to show her how copper it was but it was no longer copper at all. The buildings had faded into darkness. The fields were a faint blue-gray. The lights of the houses were small and remote. All the copper was gone, and the dark sky had gone with the copper. Only a dark night.

"Do you have a light?"

She was holding a cigarette. She leaned toward him, the cigarette between her fingers, and he saw on the slender fingers the faint brown stains of a heavy smoker.

"Of course," he said. "Just a moment, I . . . know . . . I think I have . . ." His fingers searched through his pockets. There were no matches. No matches in his pockets anywhere, and no matches on the small metal table in front of him. "I'm sorry, I'm afraid I never learned to smoke. Never felt the need somehow. I . . ."

The young man in the grey suit who sat on her right snapped his lighter and it blazed into flame.

He said to the blonde, "I think the young man there . . ."

She turned and bent for the light, the flame. A blue back toward the flame. Smoke billowing up about her bent head. And he heard her thank the young man. The young man said something and waved in the air and the waiter hurried forward. The blonde was smiling and talking to the young man. Outside the window in the night a small village sparkled with distant points of light. He was smiling at his face in the window. The town vanished as the train rushed on. He looked at his watch. His wife would probably be at the movies now if she had managed to send the children somewhere. In the balcony and ten rows back. Someday he would have to ask her why she liked the balcony. She had probably told him once but he could not remember. Perhaps she was a little farsighted. After a few minutes he got up and walked back to his compartment where the young man from Dupont and Charley were waiting for him.

3

It had been a successful trip, the building sold and the plans all decided, and he did not wake up until the train back from Chicago was passing through Trenton. Charley lay in his bed smoking a morning cigarette in half-awake contentment. When Charley saw that he was awake, Charley grinned and patted his bloated belly and said, "Gone to pot. Gone all the way to pot, eh Johnny?" Smoking and patting the belly that had once been flat, and there was something close to satisfaction in Charley's voice.

He said, "Did you ever notice I don't smoke?"

"You're lucky," Charley said. "The first one always tastes like the floor of a barn."

"But I wonder why I don't smoke?"

"Because you never started, that's easy."

"Why didn't I start? Everyone I know smokes. Why not me? Why didn't I ever feel the need?"

"Hell, start thinking like that and you'll go crazy," Charley said, "let's eat."

After Newark, he sat and drank his coffee and looked down at the black water of the Hackensack River and then out across the Jersey Flats where tall towers of burning gas stood high above the distant refineries. Towers like burning beacons above the salt marshes and city dumps and rows of billboards. In the distance, faint above the cliffs of the Palisades, he saw the hazy towers of New York. As if the city and the burning flames were reaching for something unseen in the sky. And just before the train went into the dark of the tunnel beneath the river he saw the flashing red neon signs of the Federal Container Corp. Signs that meant New York and home. Signs that had always meant New York and, soon, his home. And all he could think of now was that the signs would be there flashing red day and night long after he was dead.

"Here we are," Charley said as the train slowed to a stop in the dingy station. "Might as well report to J. J. and get the brawl over with."

They reported to J. J. Salisbury. And it was a brawl. And when it was over he declined an invitation to lunch from J. J. Angry, he declined lunch and sat alone in his office. The main office beyond his closed door was quiet and almost empty. He had not been in the office at lunchtime for many years. Too many years. Quiet and peaceful. And sunk in silence, his eyes closed, he tried to think of nothing at all so that his anger would calm. Thinking of nothing until his hand moved. Aware that his right hand had moved as if reaching for something on the desk in front of him. He opened his eyes and looked at his hand. He looked at the desk. His book. A long time ago. When he was a young man who worked hard and ate his lunch in the office. There had always been a book. A novel, or a book of philosophy, or even a book of poems. Always a book and he had forgotten. Not even remembering when it had stopped, when the first day had come when there was not a book on his desk. But his hand had remembered. The quiet of a lunchtime office. He put on his jacket and left the office.

In Brentano's on Fifth Avenue he walked slowly up and down the rows of books. So many books and so many years. He finally chose *The Town*, by Faulkner,

because he remembered reading Faulkner. And on his way back to the office he stopped in a delicatessen to buy his lunch. He stood at the end of the line that waited to buy and read the menu on the wall. He decided on roast beef with swiss cheese on white bread, a large container of coffee, and a French cruller. A woman walked past him to the head of the line and gave her order. The counter-man began to fill her order. He stared at the woman. She turned her head and grinned at the people who stood waiting. He was staring so hard that he did not notice a man in a tweed coat push past him and up to the counter until the man was giving his order. A sharp wave of anger. He pushed forward.

"Hey! Stop the shovin'!"

He was at the counter beside the man who had cheated the line.

"Roast beef and swiss cheese on white," he said.

The counterman looked at him. "I got a order, just hold it."

He said, "This pig bucked the line! I want a roast beef with swiss cheese on . . ."

"Hold your water," the man who had cheated said.

"Do you always cheat?" He faced the man. "Are you just stupid, or were your parents cheats, too? I suppose where you come from everyone is a cheating pig!"

"Go to hell," the man said.

And someone pushed him. In a fury he pushed hard in return and heard a voice behind him swear. A sharp blow struck his back. He turned with his hands raised to punch whoever had hit him and found himself facing a red-faced middle-aged woman. His heart was pounding with his rage and he held onto the counter. Then he pushed through the crowd of waiting people and out into the street. The street seemed to be shaking before his eyes. The pigs! The animal bastards! The whole street moved before him and the pigs did not deserve to be alive. Cheat and lie and push to get a sandwich two minutes sooner. The stupid goddamned bastards! The whole goddamned cheating, lying, pushing world!

Too angry to work, he sat in his office for the rest of the afternoon. Sat behind his closed door with his feet on his desk. And at five o'clock he knew he was not going to

catch the 5:20 for Connecticut. He called his wife. He told her he was going to a meeting. She was not happy but she did not question him. She would never question him. It would never cross her mind that he might be telling her a lie. But why not, everyone else did.

At five-thirty Charley looked into his office. "Gonna make the 6:15?"

"Can't," he said.

"Okay slave, see you tomorrow."

After Charley had gone the silence of the empty office began to oppress him. He left his desk and walked out into the large main office. All the desks were clean and empty. One of his own rules, *Nothing is to be left on a desk at night. The desks will be clean and devoid of all encumbrances other than a pen and ink stand, a calendar, and a memo pad with the top page clean and unused.* How long? When the books had stopped being there on his desk and when he had become the man who could write rules like those. When? Three long rows of neat desks as clean and sterile as the rows of tombstones in a military cemetery. And as he stepped through the office his footsteps struck sharp and echoing on his ears. He turned back into his office and shut the door.

He had been sitting in his chair for a long time when the young man came into his office. Just sitting there with no sense of time and wondering what a free man could do in New York on a Monday night. His door opened and a young man walked in.

"Oh . . . I'm sorry, sir. Didn't know you were still here. I need MacDonald's address. You said I should go, the open house? I don't have the address."

"MacDonald? 445 Madison Avenue, tenth floor." He studied the young man. "How are things going, Sasso? Like it here?"

"Yessir, very much."

"Why?"

"What, sir?"

He said, "Why do you like it here?"

Young Sasso blinked, unsure of what to say. "Well, the pay's good, the work's fine, there's a future."

Sasso said more, but he stopped listening. He knew all the words. MacDonald Bros., Contractors. The company

did occasional business with them. He clicked them off in his mind. Size, medium. Reliability, fair. Fees, average. Work, good but not spectacular.

He said, "Do you think MacDonald would mind a gate crasher?"

"You, sir? They'd die happy."

He laughed, "It's good to keep in touch. And stop calling me sir. If you can't make it John, try Mr. Cashmore."

"All right, Mr. Cashmore."

"That's better. Eddie, isn't it? All right, Eddie, let's make the MacDonalds happy. Maybe you'll have dinner with me later."

4

He stood near the window that overlooked Park Avenue and the distant East River. The blue-grey buildings of Brooklyn were still visible in the setting sun. John MacDonald was talking. ". . . damned glad you could make it. I've been meaning to call you about that project of yours over in Newark, the middle-income semi-detached. Now it's a big job, I admit, we couldn't handle all of it, but I think our price for the . . ."

Birnbaum, the junior partner since old MacDonald had died, hovered on the far side of the room watching them. They were not glad to see him. Pushing for business. Nothing more. Taking advantage of an unexpected opportunity. Pushing ahead in the goddamned line to get their goddamned sandwich.

He said, "MacDonald, I came here to have a few drinks."

"Jesus, kick me! How's the drink? No more business, a man's got to relax, eh? Later maybe we'll talk. Another drink coming up."

Young Sasso was talking to Birnbaum now. Business. Young Sasso was glad he, the boss, was there. It gave Sasso a lot more importance. A young man getting ahead, and if they thought he was important enough to be with the boss it wouldn't hurt Sasso. Someone handed him a fresh drink. Outside the window it was dark now. All the lights of the great city spread out against the darkness.

"Hello," the girl said. A small, thin brunette. A round face and large breasts under a tight green blouse.

"Good evening," he said.

"I'm Ruth Wizbicki. I work here."

"John Cashmore," he said.

"I know. Do you like these parties? I don't, too crowded."

"Then why do you come?"

She laughed. "You kidding? I work here, I said. Command performance, you know how it is. You're nice, you know?"

"Thank you," he said.

"I'm starved, are you? Let's go somewhere."

"Well . . ."

"Oh it's okay, the boss said I should. We can go to the Town House and charge it to the company."

He felt a hand on his shoulder. John MacDonald stood beside him. MacDonald was grinning.

"You and Ruthie doin' all right? Why don't you two go get some dinner, party's breaking up anyway. I tell you, John, I'd take you myself but I promised the wife I'd be home. I owe Ruthie a dinner anyway, you can fill in and bill it to me." And MacDonald winked at him.

The girl said, "He's cuter than you anyway, Mr. MacDonald."

"That does it," MacDonald said. "Powder your nose and don't keep the man waiting."

Both the girl and MacDonald seemed to vanish. He knew, of course, what the girl was really offering. Or perhaps she wasn't offering that. Perhaps she was only offering a dinner and some small talk for a lonely businessman. And maybe MacDonald had not winked again before he vanished somewhere in the room where everyone was leaving now. But he would never know what the girl was offering, or whether MacDonald had winked at him again or not. He realized that when he was walking rapidly down the stairs of the building. He told himself that he should turn back and at least find out what the girl was offering. But he walked on down the ten long flights of silent stairs and out into Madison Avenue. On the Avenue he turned north toward Grand Central Station. He walked through the bright night streets and won-

dered how much MacDonald had planned to pay the girl. Or was a free dinner and a chance to please the boss payment enough? Maybe she was a professional on call for the purpose. Maybe she was just a lonely girl who wanted a man to talk to, perhaps to love. At least to hold if nothing more. But not like that. Not for any woman and not for him. Never like that. Love like pushing for a sandwich in a delicatessen. And he seemed to see the blonde from the train. Standing in front of him and moving just ahead of him and speaking to him. *You don't make the rules. She knows what she's doing and she wants to do it. At least she's alive.*

He reached out to touch the blonde, saying aloud, "I don't want her, I want you."

The blonde seemed to sneer at him. *You couldn't do it. It's not in you. It's too late for you and it always has been.* And the blonde laughed at him.

He said aloud, "Don't laugh! I'll learn to smoke!"

Two men stopped to stare at him, but he was watching the blonde float before his eyes. She was still laughing. *You can't even order a sandwich and get it!*

He tried to touch her again, but she floated backward just out of reach. She seemed to be floating there forever in the night filled with the rush of passing taxis. Just out of his reach. Taunting him past people who stared at him and cursed as he bumped into them. Floating there until she suddenly turned into a tavern. He followed her into the tavern.

"What'll it be?"

The bartender was small and dark and needed a shave. He stood at the bar and blinked at the waiting bartender. The blonde was gone.

"You want something, mister?"

He looked for the blonde. The tavern was a long, bare room with a white tile floor and long rows of bottles on the shelves. Four men in the bar were watching him. But the blonde was not there.

"No," he said. "Sorry, I don't want anything."

Behind him as he walked out he heard the bartender say something and heard the other men laugh. In the street he turned north again. And walked into Grand Central Station. In the station he called his wife. He told

her he would be home in an hour. On the empty train he sat near a window and looked out because he had forgotten to buy a newspaper or anything else to read. The trip seemed longer than he remembered and the station seemed strange, unfamiliar. It had been so long since he had looked out the window on this train. Or maybe it was the whole night. All the small suburban stations were dark and deserted and somehow impermanent as if they and all the towns did not belong to the land but only sat precariously on it ready to blow away in the next winter storm. At his station his wife was waiting with the car. He kissed her and as they drove up the hill he sat and looked across the valley, but all the white houses were only pinpoints of light in windows of rooms that held nothing but all the people like himself.

"Did something go wrong at the meeting?"

"No," he said.

"Where's the newspaper?"

"I forgot it."

"You could have told me, I'd have bought one."

"I'm sorry, I forgot it."

"All right," she said, "don't tell me what's wrong."

In the house he walked to the liquor cabinet and poured a long Scotch on the rocks. He drank it and poured a second. He drank the second one slowly, waiting for the first to begin to affect him. She was hanging up her coat in silence.

"Have a drink?" he asked her.

"The children will be home soon."

"What should I do, cheer?"

She turned on the television and sat in her armchair and watched. He poured another Scotch. A quiz show. Idiot with memories answering questions. For ten thousand dollars what two men won the Most Valuable Player award three times in the National League? Stan Musial and Roy Campanella, he said to himself, pay me the ten thousand dollars. Entertainment!

He said, "In college I always walked up to the front of the lunch line and had a friend buy my lunch for me. I hate people who cheat lines."

"Then why did you do it?" But her eyes were still watching the television set.

"You really want to know?"

Her head turned sharply. "I don't know what went wrong tonight, or in Chicago, or wherever it was, but I don't have to put up with your mood! I'm trying to watch television, do you mind?"

He gulped his whisky. "I damn near quit today. Do you know that?"

She stood and walked to the television and turned it off. Then she stood looking at him. "All right, John. You haven't told me what it is, but it doesn't matter, it's always something. There's something wrong with your job, or this house, or your children, or our friends, or me. Old J. J. is a cheap bastard. Mary is too conformist. I'm not sexual enough. There's always something. Tell me, John, what was it you wanted so much? I think it's time I knew, I've had to live with it just about long enough!"

He sat down. On the edge of the couch and turning his glass of whisky in his hand as if he could learn something from the feel of the glass itself. But it was only a glass of whisky he raised and drank from.

"I wanted to be a pirate."

"I'm not joking!"

He nodded. *I never wanted to push and cheat and lie to save three minutes and get ahead. I never did, and Oh God if I only could.* "There were two kids. One of them wanted to be a vice president before he was forty. Maybe even president, own his own company. The other kid wanted to really do something. He didn't know what. Maybe he just wanted to sit in the sun and read a book all day. Neither of them could make it." And he brushed his hand at his eyes with the hand that was not holding the glass. The tears poured down his face while his mouth smiled at her. She came to hold his face against her breasts. He smelled her body and her hair. Her hands were soft on his face.

"John! What is it? Please, darling, the children."

He raised his head. "Is it such a terrible thing for them to see their father cry? Maybe they should see that more often." He smiled at her. "Well, what do you suggest? Woodworking in the cellar? Amateur theatrics? Cold showers three times a day? Raise mink? Run ten miles a

day?" And he rested his head against her breasts again. "I really do love you."

His face against her breasts, and he felt her arms around him, and he did love her, but it was the face of the blue blonde in the sky over Pennsylvania he saw in his mind. He wanted the blue blonde. And he wanted to chop down all the old oaks in Connecticut, and he wanted to spit in J. J.'s pompous face, and he wanted to quit his job, and he wanted to learn to smoke. Nothing was going to change any of that. Not the love of his wife, not all the full and busy hours of the world.

The Guest

Frederic Morton

WHEN I was eleven I had a teacher, a crotchety white-mustached one, who used to say, "Austria was an oak. Now it's a little violet in the middle of Europe, and somebody is going to come along and pluck it, and smell it a little, and throw it into the river."

Every Wednesday that year the Daimler picked me up after school, and when it released me soon afterwards my teacher's mustache always moved across my mind. For the city around me, the Vienna of 1938, was drowning in the shadow of the apartment-house entrance where my aunt's maid stood. Everything changed, including myself. I was never called by my own name.

"The Guest!" exclaimed Rosa, the maid. She always munched an almond cookie. Her bosom shook with laughter against the tips of her blonde braids. "Look at him!" She pushed my hair into my face. "He didn't get enough of our place the last time. He wants more yet! That Guest!"

The phrase sent into my blood a defensive energy which did not subside until the afternoon was over. I tried to yank her braids but was uproariously repulsed. She poked her thumbs into my ribs, stinging, tickling. We skirmished under the double-tongued gargoyles along the lobby. "Race?" she would say. The lift gate clanged shut behind her. I ran up a snow-white desert of marble stairs while the lift, a dark grillworked monster, pursued me in silence.

I always won the race by a few heartbeats. In jovial anger Rosa pushed me into the apartment. My body still glowed as I walked through the baroque twilight of the

vestibule. I let my breath heave out against it. I passed my uncle's waiting room. It was a dim, temple-like place. Some man always sat on a high-backed chair, one knee folded closely over the other, his bald head dipped into a magazine. It seemed to be the same person, the same stance, week after week. I came to think of him as a kind of Flying Dutchman patient, condemned to wait there until, at Judgment Day, the trumpets would sound, the angels chant, and my uncle open the door to his office, saying, "Next."

My aunt's room was different. Because I had been told to enter without knocking, it seemed surprised, defenseless. The orange orchids on the wallpaper shivered with hothouse translucency. The thin brass legs of her bed reached down to the parquet floor in tapering darts but appeared hardly to touch it at all. "Good day, Aunt Elsa," I said, coming nearer.

She always slept on her side, her hair spread against the pillow like a black fan, her small eagle-nosed profile extended vulnerably to the slant of the sun. Her eyes opened instantly, no matter how softly I spoke. They were of a dark-brown fretful beauty and never seemed the least bit sleep-blurred. They seemed to have kept vigil beneath the closed lids.

Then her arms arched from the sheets. Her face creased and gleamed into alertness, as if trying to recognize a long expected fear. But then her mind caught up with her wide-awake eyes. "Oh, my Guest." She smiled. She never kissed me. She took the small bouquet I had bought—I had a special allowance for that purpose.

"How quite lovely."

There was a careful, almost sardonic formality in all her words. Yet both her hands closed round the flowers with a naïve possessiveness and drew them to the blue lace of her breast.

"Will my Guest draw the blinds?"

I did, though this was the top floor and nobody could look in. Only after the room had sunk to semi-darkness would she release the flowers and let me put them in the Venetian glass vase by her bedside. "You haven't had tea *outside*, have you, Guest?" she said, half rising out of the

coverlet as if the accented word pulled at her brutally. "You haven't betrayed me?"

"'Course not." I protected myself with jauntiness.

"Good," she said. "We'll reward such loyalty." And she fell back in victorious and just slightly sarcastic fatigue.

Theoretically I was supposed to do homework while she dressed. But I could not bear the silence in her sitting room. No sound reached there, not even the ubiquitous tinkling of the Viennese streetcars. And it always seemed that it wasn't the apartment's top-floor remoteness which fended off the city, but that the silence itself was a hungry animal, an invisible octopus which ate clangings, wolfed down whistles, strangled screeches. Huge potted ferns guarded the window. A green dusk flowed from them, and a special hush of their own.

I threw myself into the rocking chair behind the table. I fought back with a barrage of creaks. But the picture on the wall fought back at *me*. It was the photograph of a boy in his teens, with black hair and a short puzzled upper lip. He was Aunt Elsa's son, or rather had been, for whenever I asked my parents about him I was told he was "no longer with us." I was not to mention him in my aunt's presence. This boy was portrayed steadying himself with one hand against a desk as he leaned forward into some fascinating void. His black, magnetized, uncomprehending eyes seized on my slightest motion as I rocked. He compounded the unreality of the room's silence. His rigid black pupils overwhelmed the sensible creaks of my chair. I stormed into the kitchen.

And Rosa was ready for me at the entrance. Her mouth munched. Her left hand was poised over the cookie bowl for the next piece. "Well, look at him," she said, chewing. "Coming down on me like a savage!"

"I am hungry," I announced for some namelessly urgent reason.

"Hungry? His Highness, the Guest, will wait for tea if he doesn't mind."

"Give me a cookie," I shouted and squared off against her.

But her determination grew with mine. "Aren't you a

greedy Guest?" she jeered. "Aren't you all a greedy bunch?"

I grabbed a cookie and she crushed it in my palm and we both snatched at the falling crumbs, laughing. She was a large strong woman, and her munching mouth would distort itself in brutal satisfaction. Yet somehow that was just where I wanted to take shelter, in the swoop of her relentless health. I chafed up against it. We giggled and grappled until the three-tone doorbell sounded. It signified the departure of my uncle's nurse. His office hours were over. I had to hurry back.

I arrived in the sitting room just as my uncle entered it from the other side with my aunt on his arm. It wasn't a specific limp which impeded her gait, but a general lassitude. Under the long dark-flowered dress her small pumps gestured like toys wound with weak springs. My uncle was dressed in a silky alpaca jacket and a stiff collar, the old-fashioned mufti of the physician. A biblical beard thundered down from his cheeks, but his eyes always opened wide with shy solicitude, his breath came quick and audible, and he looked as though he were constantly trying to summon courage to tell me to please wash fruit before eating it. But he never did. He said, "Why, I do believe that's our Guest. Hello!"

When we were all seated, my aunt reached for the sewing cabinet hidden under the table. She pulled out an unfinished sweater of orange-and-black design and started knitting instantly. At first she would do this with a certain furtiveness, the needles quivering like antennae, her palms doing tiny flutters so that the two hands looked like a trapped butterfly. Her voice, however, retained its impeccability.

"Shall we entertain our Guest?"

That was a cue for my uncle to go to the radio.

"Put on Strasbourg," my aunt said. "It is the only decent German-speaking station." And that was a signal for me to bring the Chinese Checkers board from the mantel shelf.

It was the most remarkable Chinese Checkers board I had ever seen. To begin with, it had a huge monogram in the middle, a mysterious thing, for it said SG while my uncle's and aunt's initials were EG or HG. Then, like the

sweater Aunt Elsa knitted, the board was always in a state of evolution. The game we had broken off last week still raged on it from rim to rim in suspended animation. Finally (and again like the sweater) it was illustrated in orange and black with Oriental opulence. Dragons yawned, mandarins brooded, bridges curved, lovers lisped and pagodas loomed. I bore this universe with caution.

I am not certain why I always became more reconciled to the peculiar private silence of the apartment after I had put down that board and we started playing. Possibly it was the rhythm of the game itself, possibly because my aunt's knitting became more serene. The butterfly on the sweater was no longer trapped, but flew on with slow steady wings. The music of the symphony hour at Strasbourg arranged itself through the room, ornamenting but not affecting the quiet. When it was my aunt's turn, her fingers would forsake the needles for a moment. She'd jump her pawn across an enemy phalanx (she was a skillful player), saying, "Pardon me for being opportunistic," before resuming work. As my uncle made a move he murmured, embarrassedly, "Here is an opening, I do believe." And when I had a chance to jump I liked to whack the opposing pawns a little on the head. And then it was my aunt's turn again. And the symphony swarmed and the butterfly flew, and it seemed as though my aunt were not only knitting a sweater but weaving us all into a huge strange design which receded even as it grew, as if we all became dwindling curlicued extensions of the orange-black sweater pattern and the orange-black landscape of the checker board, as if we were all turning into exquisite and far-off tapestry, and looked at ourselves through a telescope.

Then Rosa came in with the tea things, and the design was broken by the thump her foot made as she pushed open the door. My aunt concealed the sweater swiftly in the sewing cabinet under the table. She took the checker board as she had grasped the flowers, naïvely and tenderly, and carried the game to the safety of the mantel shelf. There it would ossify for another seven days in a stance of surprised interruption. Then she sat down, fingers tightly interlaced, immobile, looking like her own effigy.

Meanwhile Rosa laid the table. She was a different Rosa. A white cap stuck out of her hair and she conducted herself with almost exaggerated docility. The teacups clinked neatly as she set them down. Her head inclined in a humble angle when she asked, did the Herr Doktor want his cognac now? But when she passed behind my aunt's back, her mouth gave a giant lightning-fast munch as a token to me that underneath she was still the same and still thought we were all a greedy bunch.

My aunt didn't move after Rosa had gone. Uncle Hugo lifted the cognac glass, said, "I'm afraid she poured a bit too much," and drank it down after a suitable hesitation. My aunt still didn't stir, and so my uncle took off the lid from the covered silver dish, exclaiming, "What?" I, too, would go through the motions of astonishment. As usual, the dish held crescents, buns, rolls, all the size of cufflinks. "Small morsels for small Guests, I do believe," my uncle said, continuing to address me but glancing at my aunt to see if he was doing so properly. "How odd!"

"Well, eat your oddities," my aunt would say.

We did. Only it was most difficult, spreading butter and jam on these tiny things. I smeared my sleeve, and my uncle's patriarchal visage groaned over a miniature *semmel*. My aunt watched us with a growing yet pleased impatience. Gradually her hands unlaced.

"Permit me, gentlemen."

The butter knife glinted in her hand. It danced over bun and crescent. It split, it spread. It transferred its burden to the fork which offered to our mouths the finished delicacy, rimmed golden with butter, mined with jam. She fork-fed me, the eleven-year-old, him the bearded doctor. "There . . ." she said, "there . . . that makes it simpler." It was strange but not incongruous, for it was another way of playing on the checker board or knitting the sweater. And the music tided and a lock fell busy and black onto my aunt's forehead. "There . . . there . . ." And the design grew and swallowed us into a part of itself and drugged me into its rhythm.

Then the music stopped.

The Strasbourg news broadcast came on in queer Alsatian German. My aunt dropped the knife and interlaced her fingers. My uncle rose. He almost reached the set.

"Leave it," Aunt Elsa said with thin lips. "We might as well hear it to the end."

Now the design shattered beyond repairing. The outside world stampeded through the room with each new bulletin. My aunt endured it and took short sips of tea. After the news was over, she turned the set off herself.

"So another little speech was made in Berlin," she said, returning to her seat.

"Dear, it is a question of interpretation," my uncle said.

"In two years they will be here, on top of us," my aunt said offhand.

"My dear, the rest of the world won't permit—"

"The rest of the world? The rest of the pack won't permit the wolf?"

"You oughtn't upset yourself."

"Not at all," my aunt said in chill contentment. "It is good to know where to make one's last stand."

After these words my uncle fumbled in his vest pocket, extricated a small brown cigar and laid it in front of him on the table. "My dear," he said, gingerly stroking the cigar, "I do believe—"

But my aunt's eyes had fastened on me.

"She made you race the elevator," she said uncannily.

"I . . . a little," I stammered.

"Of course." She looked challengingly at my uncle. "He is still heated up."

My uncle laid an earnest, hairy finger on my wrist.

"She got him to do it. I've asked her a dozen times."

"His pulse is normal now," my uncle said.

"He hasn't built his mental defense against them yet," my aunt said. "They—"

She froze because, talk of the devil, Rosa entered the room. She cleared the table. She was quick and quiet and didn't give me a munch. But her tongue peeped just the slightest bit beyond her teeth. My aunt's hands interlaced, she didn't seem to see her.

"And how is my Guest's English?" she asked as soon as the girl was gone.

"My English?" I said. I was taking Latin at the *Gymnasium*. My last *Miss* had been driven away two years ago by my habit of playing soccer in her room.

"I told your father that the only safe spot may be Australia—but who listens to Cassandra's rantings?"

"Of course he remembers his English," my uncle said, stroking his cigar. "You sang a pretty song last time."

"Oh," I said. "Shall I do that one again?"

"If you please," my aunt said, "practice."

And so I got up and put my feet together and let my arms hang straight down my sides the way I did in class when reciting Goethe. Making my voice thin and phlegmatic, as I imagined Englishmen's voices to be, I sang:

My bonnie lies over the ocean, my bonnie lies over the sea,

My bonnie lies over the ocean, oh bring back my bonnie to me.

Not long afterwards we would sit in the Daimler, all three of us. Its curtains were drawn, but my aunt was tensed between my uncle and me, her arms linked into ours as if we were promenading through a hostile crowd. My uncle was dropped off first at his hospital. My aunt disembarked on the adjacent street. I kissed the hand she held out to me. Her fingers were cool and smooth against my lips, like candles. I would watch her enter a candy shop and emerge with a big candy bar wrapped in orange paper. She carried a cane and forged forward with the absorbed steady boldness of someone blind, and disappeared into a medical-looking building.

The ceremony of my visit remained the same for many months. I was relinquished to the Daimler on Wednesday afternoon much as I was dispatched to the Hebrew professor Thursday evenings—out of a furtive traditional reflex. And my sojourns at Aunt Elsa's were never discussed at home until one day in the summer of 1939. By that time Austria, the plucked little flower, *had* been thrown away. Yet the change at my aunt's apparently went so far beyond anything happening to us, that my parents spent a long while behind a locked door before deciding to let me go once more, to say goodbye.

On that day Rosa didn't meet me. She had announced that she had a Party Member fiancé and vanished after

baking herself three cartons of almond cookies and leaving the dishes unwashed in the sink. The elevator didn't budge, wasn't permitted to, legally, for such as us. The living room, the consultation office and the waiting room had been walled off from the apartment and now belonged to the physician next door.

My uncle himself had taken over Rosa's role. A rough brown apron covered his alpaca coat to pinch the lower reaches of his beard. "The Guest!" he said. He led me to the sitting room, his hand tight around mine, his breath barely audible.

In the sitting room my aunt stood very proudly in her dark-flowered dress. And I felt her watching me as I froze. For I saw what had caused my parents' hesitation. It was a young man who sat by the table. Aunt Elsa's hand rested on his shoulder. He ate an orange-wrapped chocolate bar. He ate it like a small child, keeping the bar near his mouth even when he wasn't gnawing at it, and never taking his eyes off the color of the wrapper. His short upper lip moved incessantly, like a rabbit's. I recognized him from the picture. He was my cousin, Aunt Elsa's son.

"So our old Guest is here," my aunt said, her chin lifted. "We hear you are all leaving for London tomorrow."

"Yes," I said. I knew I wasn't supposed to stare, but I noticed the orange-black sweater peeping from under the young man's jacket.

"Well, then, are you serious about your English now?" my aunt asked briskly.

I nodded.

"Capital," my aunt said. "And don't you feel badly because we decided to stay. We have a new Guest now." Her hand stroked quickly up and down her son's head. "Do you know why they ejected him from the sanatorium? Not merely because of race. Or why those great free countries would not give him a visa? Not for their so-called medical reasons. No, because he was the first to be on to them all. The first to defend himself. He turned his back on the world before it had a chance to turn its back on him. I felt he had a reason the moment he stopped

talking. Let no mother pity me. Each time I visited him he taught me something."

She paused. It was almost as though she waited for her son to speak. Then I realized she was displaying his silence. Her voice rose in triumph. "Did they call us mad in your house? Well, go and ask your parents now: Who was sane—and who was not?"

I did not know what to say. My eyes strayed to the mantel shelf where the pawns on the checker board had drawn together into solid pyramids, ready at last for a new game. I saw the ferns coloring the light like a green stained-glass window. I saw my uncle bend over the chiffonier and polish a spot with a corner of his apron. All was silent, weirdly perfect. There was no Strasbourg music, but my aunt's design was seamless and inviolable now.

"Goodbye," I said.

I embraced my uncle. His short breath stammered. His beard pricked me with awkward love. I did not put my arms around my aunt, for she held her hand out high. Her fingers were self-possessed and, for the first time, faintly perfumed. Nothing but silence followed me as I left the room. Nothing, except a whisper of tinfoil as my cousin nibbled on the chocolate.

The Application

Jay Neugeboren

It had started raining again, a thin mist-like drizzle through which the workers passed as they filed slowly into the Indiana Auto Works, droning conversation to each other. In a few minutes when most of the men on the first shift were washing up and the second shift had not yet started, the usual fierce noises had subsided to a dull rumble.

Josh walked to his locker and changed from his neatly pressed black double-breasted suit to his factory clothes. When he arrived at his three-cornered stool, next to his welding press, the paper was already there:

APPLICATION FOR THE NAACP

- Name (to best of your knowledge):.....
Mother's name:
Father's name (List first three possibilities): 1.
2. 3.
Place of birth (check one):
1. County Hospital 4. Cotton Patch
2. Belgian Congo 5. Bathroom
3. Swamp 6. Brothel
Number of children (approximate) ... Number of gold teeth...
Number of wives (including those legally married):
Age (to nearest 5-year figure):
Species (check one): Big Black Buck..... Boogie Brown.....
Sambo Tan
How often do you have your hair straightened?
List three most prominent identifying scars: 1.
2. 3.

Make of car (Check one): Buick..... Cadillac.....
Number of Payments made: One..... Two..... Three.....
Cost of accessories (don't count first \$200.00):
Number of suits owned:..... *Number of lucky charms*
Number of TV sets: *Color of favorite hat*
Do you prefer a razor or switchblade? *Length*
of blade
Court convictions (List number of times) 1. Burglary.....
 2. Rape..... 3. Car-theft..... 4. Other.....
How many hours a day are you usually sober? None.....
 One or two..... More than two.....
How many loan and finance companies are you indebted to?
(roughly):
What was the last job you held for more than six months?
(pimping doesn't count)
If you were given a passage and 5 dollars would you go back
to Africa?
How do you prefer to be addressed? (check one): Daddy-o
 Like man..... Blackie..... Shine..... Nigger-boy.....
 Coon..... Hey Jig.....

So that the fight between Emmett and Josh that everybody had been anticipating for three years finally came. It had been brewing slowly, simmering, ageing, until the moment came when both were ready to make their immense stores of inner hatred visible, tangible, explosive to themselves and to each other. It was only waiting for an excuse befitting the amount of hatred in each. Just any excuse wouldn't do. Over the years the workers had often speculated about the fight—how it would come, when it would come, who would win, what implements of battle would be used. Around the toilets, in the cafeteria, the Union Hall, in local taverns, at the Coke and coffee machines, and even in the foreman's offices and toilets and dining room, the speculation went on, coming up every now and then as a topic of conversation, a natural remark passed as a part of the day's work—another item to relieve the monotony of the work, to vary tried, tested and tired conversation-pieces as the half-assembled trucks moved down the lines.

Emmett had been open about his hatred. "He makes my blood boil," he would say. "Someday I'm gonna break his ass. The way he never says nothin' but looks at ya like he'd spit on ya and now wanted ya to beg his

pardon fer bein' in the way o' his spit—Black Bastard. I'd give a month's pay for a chance to bloody that skin o' his. . . .”

Josh never said anything. But in his mind, behind his blood-veined eyes, simmering beneath his haughty, dignified, proud demeanor, he hated Emmett every bit as much as Emmett hated him.

Not even the few friends he had knew the depths of his hatred. But day after day, sitting on his three-cornered stool, pressing the buttons that made the top half of the press meet the bottom and weld the two door sections together, he had his eye on Emmett. And he vowed to himself that if he ever killed a white man it would be Emmett Rumble. Because in Emmett's eyes he saw that look of savage disgust that he remembered from his childhood, from the white men of Bullett and Troy (Alabama) when a nigger “forgot his place,” that supercilious hateful glare, mixed with, arising from, fear of niggers like Josh who wouldn't stay in their place but assumed the walk and talk and attitude of any man.

He wondered now. Exactly when was it that he had made his vow? When he was already on the bus heading north? When he was working in the garage? When he'd left school? When he was twelve years old and his father had strapped him for talking back to a white man? He didn't remember and it didn't matter. It might have been at fourteen and it might have been at forty. Or it might have been none of those times. That was more likely. It was more likely that the vow had never been made, but had just always been there; the vow that someday he would pick out a single white man, would *select* him. Many nights, walking the streets of the Indiana city he'd seen men who almost qualified. He'd hated them all, and had almost hated those who'd smiled at him or nodded to him more than those who ignored him.

Long nights alone in his apartment the thought had kept him alive. In fact, he knew that if the thought hadn't been there during those nights, hadn't sustained itself through wonderful dreams of revenge and blood, he'd have been in many fights long before this. Fortunately, though, he'd noticed the way Emmett had looked at him one day. Not indifference, in that look. It was the look,

the face, that could fill the dreams; and daytime, thinking of Emmett, of spreading his white man's blood on the coal black floor of the factory, Josh had developed the twitching habit of touching his side-pocket to feel the knife, and laughing. Aloud. He knew many of the men mocked the habit and the laugh, but he didn't care. He'd have the last laugh.

He laughed again now as he began reading the piece of paper. When he looked up most of the men on his assembly line were already in their places.

"Get me my relief man," Josh said to his foreman, not waiting to get an OK from the foreman, but already walking in Emmett's direction, the paper now folded in one hand, the other hand loose at his side, itching for the pocket.

"Whaddaya mean?—Hey, Lincoln! Where you going? Come back here. We gotta get the line started up. God-dam you—I said come back or I'll slap a reprimand on you. . . ."

Emmett heard him approaching (he was leaning over his toolbox, getting out his electrician's holster) but he didn't look up.

"I'm thinking you left somethin' over by my chair, mister," Josh said, his voice low and cracking just a bit with nervousness.

"What?" said Emmett, looking up and seeing Josh's eyes gleaming at him as if there were little flashlight bulbs behind the lenses. For the first time he seemed to notice Josh's size, his hulking broad body. But he'll be slow, Emmett thought, and if I have a little room I'll be too quick for him. And too smart. This nigger can't be as smart as he tries to put on. "You addressin' me?"

"You heard me."

"Well as far as I can figger, I ain't fergot nothin'. You better be gettin' to work."

Emmett strapped on his holster and turned, walking out into the aisle toward the intersection where there would be more room. He passed Jim Bryant, his buddy, and winked. Already the men in the vicinity had stopped whatever they were doing and waited, their eyes eager for the violence they anticipated. Within a minute, by the time Emmett had reached the intersection of the aisles,

men were closing around, and groups of Negroes sauntered slowly over, already hearing the whispers that the fight between Em and Josh had finally come.

Josh followed Emmett, not hurrying, knowing that Emmett wanted to fight, to get it over with also.

"Hold it there, mister," Josh said. "I was talkin' to you. I haven't finished."

"What else ya got to say?" Emmett said, turning on Josh, a slight smile at the corner of his mouth, his hand resting on the hammer that hung in his holster.

"You recognize this?" Josh said, showing him the application.

"Oh this—?" Emmett said, and laughed for the benefit of the men circled round them. A mule driver honked to get through, but stopped as soon as he saw the two men facing each other. "I didn't forget it. I figgered I was doin' ya a favor. Figgered ya might be interested in fillin' it out."

One of the men started to laugh, but stopped quickly, noticing a group of Negro workers to his right.

"Ya mean ya got it filled out already?—You're pretty smart fer a—fer a—"

"Nobody treats me like dirt, mister," Josh said, moving slowly forward. The circle was wide now around them, fifteen feet in diameter.

"I put five bucks on ole Josh," one man whispered.

"I'll cover that."

"Any o' you boys wanna bet?" Jim Bryant said to a group of Negro workers. "I got fifteen bucks I'd like to double."

"We'll cover it, man. Be like pickin' cherries."

"Nobody pushes me around, mister," Josh said. He thrust his arm forward, the application clenched in his fist. Emmett started back, whipping the hammer out of his holster. Betting stopped. "You better say you're sorry and bend down and pick up this thing and tear it up or I'll cut you from your belly button to the tip of your ugly head."

Josh tossed the piece of paper in front of him. Emmett rubbed his palms with his finger tips. Wet. But nobody'd make him cower before a nigger. Not in front of all the men.

"Sure," Emmett said, moving a step forward. "I'll pick it up."

He still held the hammer in his hand as he began to bend over in front of Josh. But then, his body bent over, his hand darted up suddenly in whip-lash and the hammer glanced off Josh's cheek, red blood showing immediately on the black perforated face. With his other arm he grabbed Josh's leg behind the knee and tripped him, falling upon him and raising the hammer to his full arm's length and starting it in its downward arc, but never landing another blow because even while Josh was falling backward he had slipped it out of his pocket and a moment later Emmett fell on top of him you could hear the intake of breath as every last man saw the light flash, glint from the switchblade.

Emmett rolled off Josh, clutching at his stomach, and Josh stood up and bent his shoulders down, the knife now visible to all, its silver blade tipped with a dripping of blood, crimson and liquid. Emmett backed away, breathing in deeply, cursing under his breath, gasping for breath.

"Gimme yer bottle o' whiskey, Jim. Damn it. Where are ya? Gimme yer bottle."

Bryant reached into his side pocket and took out the bottle. He took it out of its paper bag and handed it to Emmett. Emmett took a quick swallow, moving around backward along the rim of the circle now, watching waiting, while Josh just glared and followed him with his eyes, not saying a word, but even Emmett could read the expression in his eyes now. Emmett looked to the side and lifted the bottle, bringing it down with a gurgling crash against a post.

"We're even now, big man," he said, dropping the hammer to the floor and holding the jagged edges of the bottle forward. "Yer yellin' show now."

Josh didn't answer but continued stalking.

"Man, he looks like the old Brown Bomber now, don't he?"

"Don't look like no Brown Bomber to me."

"Five bucks says he mops the floor with your boy."

"Make it ten."

"You're on, man."

Emmett smiled now, despite the pain that seemed somewhere in his back, pulling down and ripping, but he smiled because he felt the worst was over. He wouldn't be stupid enough to get that close again. Because Josh may be fast with that knife, but he's slow otherwise, like all niggers, slow at everything except running. Them nigger-boys could run. That was one thing. Like when they used to hell up down in Louisville when he was a kid and get one of them alone and paint on him in white: *Keep this nigger running. Keep this nigger running.*

Emmett lunged forward, but Josh parried with his forearm and they backed away from each other. Good, Emmett thought. I'll set him up. He lunged again, and again Josh parried with a sweep of his arm, cutting Emmett's sleeve with the knife. Emmett backed away and then came forward a third time and lunged. Josh went to parry, but before he could Emmett had ducked his head and his hand wasn't there when Josh's arm went flailing out to meet it; instead Emmett's fake had worked and he had ducked his head and come plowing into Josh's midsection, the glass edges aimed for Josh's groin. But in missing Emmett, Josh stumbled and avoided the brunt of Emmett's charge so that the broken bottle ripped into his thigh and with his left hand Josh clubbed the top of Emmett's head as he went by. Emmett fell to the floor.

The broken bottle slid across the floor and shattered. Josh moved in for the kill now, hulking above Emmett.

"Lift his liver, man," someone shouted to Josh.

"I got another ten on Josh if anyone'll see me now."

"Who's got a knife?" Jim Bryant asked. He turned toward two Negroes. "One of you got a knife or a razor?"

"You talkin' to us, Jim?"

"Keep it fair. Throw Em a knife."

The boys looked at each other, then one of them shrugged, reached into his pocket, and flipped a knife into the open circle. Josh kicked it at Emmett, who picked it up and rose to one knee. Josh moved forward slowly, wary now. Emmett watched him, seeing two Joshes as his head refused to clear. He flicked the knife open and waited. The two black faces merged into one and then separated, then merged again. There was a dull ache at

the back of his head and his legs felt cold and damp. Above him he saw the black figure coming and he began to lift up from his knee but then everything went blank and the only thing he remembered was being thrown back down and then the sound of something dull, like punching against a sponge and a warm liquid feeling all over him, a quiet almost peaceful feeling, doubled up, his knees trying to reach his chest, his arms rigid, straining.

Josh saw his chance and was on Emmett before he could rise, knocking away the knife and crashing his body against him, driving the knife up to its hilt into the flesh of Emmett Rumble. Satisfaction came with the plunge and he licked his lips and there was no world for him in that instant, but only a pale white face before him, under him and the knife red, withdrawn from the soft bodyflesh, and now a speck of blood on that white face and now another and the eyes that had hated him all these years started to close. Then he hesitated. The factory was still: a hush, funereal quiet in which the workers paid their respects to the act they were waiting for him to conclude.

The silence startled him—he wouldn't be satisfied! It seemed impossible. It hardly seemed fair. The thought terrified him and his body hurried to carry out the execution; but in the backlash his mind had already reverted, and he was utterly disappointed, petulant, child-like—and he knew it was all over for him. The knife hung in the air, and seeing it there, seeing the doubt on his face, Jim Bryant took advantage and rushed into the circle, knocking him away. Nobody said anything, or even began to collect on the bets. They just stood there, staring, quiet.

First Views of the Enemy

Joyce Carol Oates

JUST around the turn the road was alive. First to assault the eye was a profusion of heads, black-haired, bobbing, and a number of straw hats that looked oddly professional—like straw hats in a documentary film; and shirts and overalls and dresses, red, yellow, beflowered, dotted, striped, some bleached by the sun, some stiff and brilliant, just bought and worn proudly out of the store. The bus in which they were traveling—a dead dark blue, colored yet without any color—was parked half on the clay road and half in the prickly high grass by the ditch. Its old-fashioned hood was open, yanked cruelly up and doubled on itself, and staring into its greasy, dust-flecked tangle of parts was the driver, the only fair, brown-haired one of the bunch. Annette remembered, later, that as her station wagon moved in astonishment toward them the driver looked up and straight at her: a big indifferent face, curious without interest, smeared with grease as if deliberately, to disguise himself. No kin of yours, lady, no kin! he warned contemptuously.

Breaking from a group of children, running with arms out for a mock embrace, a boy of about seven darted right toward Annette's car. The boy's thick black hair, curled with sweat, plastered onto his forehead, framed a delicate, cruelly tanned face, a face obviously dead white beneath its tan: great dark eyes, expanded out of proportion, neat little brows like angels' brows—that unbelievable and indecent beauty of children exploited for art—a pouting mouth, still purple at the corners from the raspberries picked and hidden for the long bus ride, these lips now turning as Annette stared into a hilarious grin and

crying out at her and the stricken child who cringed beside her, legs already drawn up fatly at the knees——

In agony the brakes cried, held: the scene, dizzy with color, rocked with the car, down a little, back up, giddily, helplessly, while dust exploded up on all sides. "Mommy!" Timmy screamed, fascinated by the violence, yet his wail was oddly still and drawn out, and his eyes never once turned to his mother. The little Mexican boy had disappeared in front of the car. Still the red dust arose, the faces at the bus jerked around together, white eyes, white teeth, faces were propelled toward the windows of the bus, empty a second before. "God, God," Annette murmured; she had not yet released the steering wheel, and on it her fingers began to tighten as if they might tear the wheel off, hold it up to defend her and her child, perhaps even to attack.

A woman in a colorless dress pushed out of the crowd, barefooted in the red clay, pointed her finger at Annette and shouted something—gleefully. She shook her fist, grinning, others grinned behind her; the bus driver turned back to his bus. Annette saw now the little boy on the other side of the road, popping up safe in the ditch, and jumping frantically—though the sharp weeds must have hurt his feet—and laughing, yelling, shouting as if he were insane. The air rang with shouts, with laughter. A good joke. What was the joke? Annette's brain reeled with shock, sucked for air as if drowning. Beside her Timmy wailed softly, but his eyes were fastened on the boy in the ditch. "He's safe, he's safe," Annette whispered. But others ran toward her now—big boys, tall but skinny, without shirts. How their ribs seemed to run with them, sliding up and down inside the dark tanned flesh with the effort of their legs! Even a few girls approached, hard dark faces, already aged, black hair matted and torn about their thin shoulders. They waved and cried, "Missus! Missus!" Someone even shouted, "Cadillac!" though her station wagon, already a year old, was far from being a Cadillac. As if to regain attention the little boy in the ditch picked up something, a handful of pebbles, and threw it at the car, right beneath Timmy's pale gaping face. A babble of Spanish followed, more laughter, the barefoot woman who must have been the boy's mother

strode mightily across the road, grabbed the boy, shook him in an extravagant mockery of punishment: sucked her lips at him, made spitting motions, rubbed his head hard with the palm of her hand—this hurt, Annette saw with satisfaction, for the child winced in spite of his bravado. At the bus the American man's back swelled damply and without concern beneath his shirt; he did not even glance around.

Annette leaned to the window, managed a smile. "Please let me through," she called. Her voice surprised her; it sounded like a voice without body or identity, channeled in over a radio.

The boys made odd gestures with their hands, not clenching them into fists, but instead striking with the edges of their hands, knife-like, into the air. Their teeth grinned and now, with them so close (the bravest were at her fender), Annette could see how discolored their teeth were, though they had seemed white before. They must have been eating dirt! she thought vaguely. "Please let me through," she said. Beside her Timmy sat in terror. She wanted to reach over and put her hand over his eyes, hide this sight from him—this mob of dirty people, so hungry their tongues seemed to writhe in their mouths, their exhaustion turned to frenzy. "Missus! Missus! Si, si, Cadillac!" the boys yelled, pounding on the front of the car. The women, men, even very old people—with frail white hair—watched, surprised and pleased at being entertained.

"Please. Please." Suddenly Annette pressed on the horn: what confidence that sound inspired! The boys hesitated, moved back. She toyed with the accelerator, wanting to slam down on it, to escape. But suppose one of them were in the way. . . . The horror of that falling thud, the vision of blood sucked into red clay, stilled her nervousness, made her inch the big car forward slowly, slowly. And in the back those unmistakable bags of groceries, what would be showing at the tops? Maybe tomatoes, pears, strawberries—perhaps picked by these people a few days ago—maybe bread, maybe meat—Annette's face burned with something more than shame. But when she spoke her voice showed nothing. "Let me through, please. Let me through." She sounded cool and still.

Then she was past. The station wagon picked up speed. Behind her were yells, cries no longer gleeful, now insulting, vicious: in the mirror fists, shouting faces, the little boy running madly into the cloud of dust behind the car. He jerked something back behind his head, his skinny elbow swung, and with his entire body he sent a mud-rock after the car which hit the back window square, hard, and exploded. With her fingers still frozen to the steering wheel Annette sped home.

Beside her the child, fascinated, watched the familiar road as if seeing it for the first time. That tender smile was something strange; Annette did not like it. Annette herself, twitching with fear, always a nervous woman, electric as the harassed or the insanely ill are, saw with shock that her face in the mirror was warm and possessed. That was she, then, and not this wild, heart-thumping woman, afraid of those poor children in the road. . . . Her eyes leaped home; her mind anticipated its haven. Already, straightening out of a turn, she could see it: the long, low, orange-brick home, trees behind the house not yet big enough for shade, young trees, a young house, a young family. Cleared out of the acres of wheat and wood and grass fields on either side, a surprise to someone driving by, looking for all the world as if it and its fine light-green grass, so thin as to look unreal, and its Hercules fence had been picked up somewhere far away and dropped down here. Two miles away, on the highway which paralleled this road, there were homes something like this, but on this road there were only, a half-mile ahead, a few farmhouses, typical, some shacks deserted and not deserted, and even a gas station and store; otherwise nothing. Annette felt for the first time the insane danger of this location, and heard with magical accuracy her first question when her husband had suggested it: "But so far out. . . . Why do you want it so far out?" City children, both of them, the hot rich smell of sunlight and these soundless distances had never been forbidding, isolating. Instead each random glance at the land strengthened in them a sense of their own cleverness. Children of fortune, to withdraw from their comfortable pasts, to raise a child in such safety!—It was fifteen miles to the nearest town, where Annette did her shop-

ping and Timmy went to school, and forty miles to the city where her husband worked.

Annette turned into the driveway, drove slowly into the garage. Still in a trance, angry at herself, she got out of the car but stood with her hand still lingering on the steering wheel. A thin, fashionably thin young woman, for years more woman than girl, in a white dress she stood with a remote, vague smile, hand lightly on the wheel, mind enticed by something she could not name. Perplexed, incredulous: in spite of the enormity of what threatened (the migrant workers were hardly a mile away) she felt slowed and meaningless. Her inertia touched even Timmy, who usually jumped out of the car and slammed the door. If only he would do this, and she could cry, "Timmy! *Please!*" calm might be restored. But no, he climbed down on his side like a little old man; he pushed the door back indifferently so that it gave a feeble click and did not even close all the way. For a while mother and son stood on opposite sides of the car; Annette could tell that Timmy did not move and was not even looking at her. Then his footsteps began. He ran out of the garage.

Annette was angry. Only six, he understood her, he knew what was to come next: he was to help her with the packages, with the doors, open the cupboards in the kitchen, he would be in charge of putting things into the refrigerator. As if stricken by a sudden bad memory Annette stood in the garage, waiting for her mind to clear. What was there in Timmy's running out? For an instant she felt betrayed—as if he cherished the memory of that strange little boy, and ran out to keep it from her. She remembered the early days of her motherhood, how contemptuous she had been of herself, of what she had accomplished—a baby she refused to look at, a husband neurotic with worry, a waiting life of motherhood so oppressive that she felt nausea contemplating it: Is this what I have become? What is this baby to me? Where am I? Where as *I*? Impassioned, a month out of college and fearful, in spite of her attractiveness, that she would never be married, Annette had taken the dangerous gamble of tearing aside her former life, rejecting the familiar possessions and patterns that had defined her, and had

plunged, with that intense confident sharp-voiced young man, into a new life she was never quite sure had not betrayed the old, stricken the old: her parents, her lovely mother, now people to write to, send greeting cards to, hint vaguely at visiting. . . .

Sighing, she began to move. She took the packages out of the car, went outside (the heat was now brilliant), put them down and, with deft angry motions in case Timmy was secretly watching, pulled down the garage door and locked it. "There!" But when she turned, her confidence was distracted. She stared at the house. Shrubbery hiding the concrete slab—basements were not necessary this far south—rosebushes bobbing roses, vulnerable, insanely gaudy, the great picture window that made her think, always, someone was slyly watching her, even the faint professional sweep of grass out to the road—all these in their elaborate planned splendor shouted mockery at her, mockery at themselves, as if they were safe from destruction! Annette fought off the inertia again; it passed close by her, a whiff of something like death, the same darkness that had bothered her in the hospital, delivered of her child. She left the packages against the garage (though the ice cream in its special package might be melting) and, awkward in her high heels, hurried out the drive. She shielded her eyes: nothing in sight down the road. It was a red clay road, a country road that would never be paved, and she and her husband had at first taken perverse pride in it. But it turned so, she had never noticed that before, and great bankings of foliage hid it, disguised its twistings, so that she could see not more than a quarter mile away. Never before had the land seemed so *flat*.

She hurried. At the gate the sun caught up with her, without ceremony. She struggled to swing the gate around (a few rusty, loosened prongs had caught in the grass); she felt perspiration breaking out on her body, itching and prickling her, under her arms, on her back. The white dress must have hung damp and wrinkled about her legs. Panting with the exertion, she managed to get the gate loose and drag it around; it tilted down at a jocose angle, scraping the gravel; then she saw that there was no lock, she would need a padlock, there was one in the

garage somewhere, and in the same instant, marvelling at her stamina, she turned back.

Hurrying up the drive, she thought again of the little Mexican boy. She saw his luxurious face, that strange unhealthy grin inside his embracing arms—it sped toward her. Cheeks drawn in as if by age, eyes protruding with—it must have been hunger—dirty hands like claws reaching out, grabbing, demanding what? What would they demand of her? If they were to come and shout for her out in the road, if she were to offer them—something—milk, maybe, the chocolate cookies Timmy loved so, maybe even money? would they go away, then, would they thank her and run back to their people? Would they continue their trip north, headed for Oregon and Washington? What would happen? Violence worried the look of the house, dizzied Annette: there were the yellow roses she tended so fondly, rich and sprawling against the orange brick. In the sunlight their petals, locked intricately inside one another, were vivid, glaringly detailed, as if their secret life were swelling up in rage at her for having so endangered their beauty.

There the packages lay against the garage, and seeing them Annette forgot about the padlock. She stooped and picked them up. When she turned again she saw Timmy standing just inside the screen door. "Timmy, open the—" she said, vexed, but he had already disappeared. Inside the kitchen she slammed the bags down, fought back the impulse to cry, stamped one heel on the linoleum so hard that her foot buzzed with pain. "Timmy," she said, her eyes shut tight, "come out in this kitchen."

He appeared, carrying a comic book. That was for the book of it, of course; he had not been reading. His face was wary. Fair like his mother, blond-toned, smart for his age, he had still about his quiet plump face something that belonged to field animals, wood animals, shrewd, secret creatures that have little to say for themselves. He read the newspaper like his father, cultivated the same thoughtful expression; encouraged, he talked critically about his schoolteacher with a precocity that delighted his father, frightened Annette (to her, even now, teachers were somehow *different* from other people); he had known the days of the week, months of the year, conti-

nents of the world, planets of the solar system, major star groupings of the universe, at an astonishing age—as a child he approached professional perfection. But Annette, staring at him, was not sure, now, that she could trust him. What if, when the shouting began outside, when “Missus! Missus!” demanded her, Timmy ran out to them, joined them, stared back at her in the midst of their white eyes and dirty arms? They stared at each other as if this question had been voiced.

“You almost killed him,” Timmy said.

His voice was soft. Its innocence showed that he knew how daring he was; his eyes as well, neatly fringed by pale lashes, trembled slightly in their gaze. “What?” said Annette. “What?”

The electric clock, built into the big white range, whirled in the silence. Timmy swallowed, rustled his comic book, pretended to wipe his nose—a throwback to a habit long outgrown, hoping to mislead her—and looked importantly at the clock. “*He* hit the car. Two times,” he said.

This was spoken differently. The ugly spell was over. “Yes, he certainly did,” Annette said. She was suddenly busy. “He certainly did.” After a moment Timmy put down the comic book to help her. They worked easily, in silence. Eyes avoided one another. But Annette felt feverishly excited; something had been decided, strengthened. Timmy, stooping to put vegetables in the bottom of the refrigerator, felt her staring at him and peered up, his little eyebrows raised in a classic look of wonder. “You going to call Daddy?” he said. Annette had been thinking of this but when Timmy suggested it, it was exposed for what it was—a child’s idea. “That won’t be necessary,” she said. She folded bags noisily and righteously.

When they finished mother and son wandered without enthusiasm into the dining room, into the living room, as if they did not really want to leave the kitchen. Annette’s eyes flinched at what she saw: crystal, polished wood, white walls, aqua lampshades, white curtains, sand-toned rug, detailed, newly cleaned, spreading regally across the room—surely no one ever walked on that rug! That was what they would say if they saw it. And the glassware of in the corner, spear-like, transparent green, a great win

shadow behind it, linking it with the green grass outside, denying a barrier, inviting in sunlight, wind, anyone's eyes approaching—Annette went to the window and pulled the draw drapes shut; that was better; she breathed gently, coaxed by the beauty of those drapes into a smile: they were white, perfectly hung, sculptured superbly in generous swelling curves. And fireproof, if it came to that. . . . Annette turned. Timmy stood before the big red swivel chair as if he were going to sit in it—he did not—and looked at her with such a queer, pinched expression, in spite of his round face, that Annette felt a sudden rush of shame. She was too easily satisfied, too easily deluded. In all directions her possessions stretched out about her, defining her, identifying her, and they were vulnerable and waiting, the dirt road led right to them; and she could be lured into smiling! That must be why Timmy looked at her so strangely. "I have something to do," she murmured, and went back to the dining room. The window there was open; she pulled it down and locked it. She went to the wall control and turned on the air conditioning. "Run, honey, and close the windows," she said. "In your room."

She went into the bedroom, closed the windows there and locked them. Outside there was nothing—smooth lawn, lawn furniture (fire-engine red) grouped casually together, as if the chairs made of tubing and spirals were having a conversation. Annette went into the bathroom, locked that window, avoided her gaze in the mirror, went, at last, into the "sewing room," which faced the road, and stood for a while staring out the window. She had never liked the color of that clay, really—it stretched up from Louisiana to Kentucky, sometimes an astonishing blood-red, pulsating with heat. Now it ran watery in the sunlight at the bend. Nothing there. Annette waited craftily. But still nothing. She felt that, as soon as she turned away, the first black spots would appear—coarse black hair—and the first splashes of color; but she could not wait. There was too much yet to do.

She found Timmy in the living room again, still not sitting in the chair. "I'll be right back, darling," she said. "Stay here. It's too hot outside for you. Put on the television—Mommy will be right back."

She got the clipping shears out of the closet and went outside, still teetering in her high heels. There was no time to waste, no time. The yellow rosebush was farthest away, but most important. She clipped roses off, a generous amount of stem. Though hurried—every few seconds she had to stare down the road—she took time to clip off some leaves as well. Then she went to the red bushes, which now exclaimed at her ignorance: she could see they were more beautiful, really, than the yellow roses. Red more beautiful than yellow; yellow looked common, not stunning enough against the house. It took her perhaps ten minutes, and even then she had to tear her eyes away from the lesser flowers, over there in the circular bed; she did not have time for them—unaccountably she was angry at them, as if they had betrayed her already, grateful to the migrant workers who were coming to tear them to pieces! Their small stupid faces nodded in the hot wind.

Timmy awaited her in the kitchen. He looked surprised at all the roses. "The big vase," she commanded. In a flurry of activity, so pleased by what she was doing that she did not notice the dozens of bleeding scratches on her hands, she laid the roses on the cupboard, clipped a few leaves, arranged them, took down a slender copper vase and filled it with water, forced some roses in, abandoned it when Timmy came in with the milk-glass vase (wedding present from a remote aunt of hers). The smell of roses filled the kitchen, sweetly drugged Annette's anxiety. Beauty, beauty—it was necessary to have beauty, to possess it, to keep it around oneself! How well she understood that now.

Finished abruptly, she left the refuse on the cupboard and brought the vases into the living room. She stood back from them, peered critically . . . saw a stain on the wood of the table already; she must have spilled some water. And the roses were not arranged well, too heavy, too many flowers, an insane jumble of flowered faces, some facing each other nose to nose, some staring down toward the water in the vase in an indecent way, some at the ceiling, some at Annette herself. But there was no time to worry over them, already new chores called to her, demanded her services. What should she do next?

—The answer hit her like a blow, how could she be so stupid? The doors were not even locked! Staggered by this, she ran to the front door, with trembling fingers unlocked it. How could she have overlooked this? Was something in her, some secret corner, conspiring with the Mexicans down the road? She ran stumbling to the back door—that had even been left open, it could have been seen from the road! A few flies buzzed idly, she had no time for them. When she appeared, panting, in the doorway she saw Timmy by the big white vase trying to straighten the flowers. . . . "Timmy," she said sharply. "You'll scratch yourself. Go away, go into the other room, watch television."

He turned at once but did not look at her. She watched him and felt, then, that it was a mistake to speak that way to him—in fact, a deliberate error, like forgetting about the doors; might not her child be separated from her if they came, trapped in the other room? "No, no, Timmy," she said, reaching out for him—he looked around, frightened—"no, come here. Come here." He came slowly. His eyes showed trust; his mouth, pursed and tightened, showed wariness, fear of that trust. Annette saw all this—had she not felt the same way about him, wishing him dead as soon as he was born?—and flicked it aside, bent to embrace him. "Darling, I'll take care of you. Here. Sit here. I'll bring you something to eat."

He allowed her to help him sit at the dining-room table. He was strangely quiet, his head bowed. There was a surface mystery about that quietness! Annette thought, in the kitchen, I'll get through that, I'll prove myself to him. At first cunningly, then anxiously, she looked through the refrigerator, touching things, rearranging things, even upsetting things—a jar of pickles—and then came back carrying some strawberry tarts, made just the day before, and the basket of new strawberries, and some apples. "Here, darling," she said. But Timmy hesitated; while Annette's own mouth watered painfully he could only blink in surprise. Impatiently she said, "Here, eat it, eat them. You love them. *Here*." "No napkins," Timmy said fearfully. "Never mind napkins, or a table cloth, or plates," Annette said angrily—how slow her child seemed

to her, like one of those empty-faced children she often saw along the road, country children, staring at her red car. "Here. Eat it. Eat it." When she turned to go back to the kitchen she saw him lifting one of the tarts slowly to his mouth.

She came back almost immediately—bringing the package of ice cream, two spoons, a basket of raspberries, a plate of sliced chicken, wrapped loosely in wax paper—— She was overcome by hunger. She pulled a chair beside Timmy, who had not yet eaten—he stared gravely at her—and began to eat one of the tarts. It convulsed her mouth, so delicious was it, so sweet yet at the same time sour, tantalizing; she felt something like love for it, jealousy for it, and was already reaching for another when she caught sight of Timmy's stare. "Won't Daddy be home? Won't we have dinner?" he pleaded.

But he paused. His lips parted moistly and he stared at his mother, who smiled back at him, reassuring him, comforting him, pushing one of the tarts toward him with her polished nails. Then something clicked in his eyes. His lips damp with new saliva, he smiled at her, relieved, pleased. As if a secret ripened to bursting between them, swollen with passion, they smiled at each other. Timmy said, before biting into the tart, "*He* can't hit the car again, it's all locked up." Annette said, gesturing at him with sticky fingers, "Here, darling. Eat this. Eat. *Eat.*"

The Practice of an Art

Leonard Wallace Robinson

THE two great mounds of logs, mostly pine and ash, were both higher than the tall, hook-nosed young man who stood at the chopping block next to them. One of the great mounds was the wood he had already split; the other the unsplit logs that lay ahead to do. Together they hid from his view a rambling white farmhouse about a quarter mile away. He was alone, intensely alone in the August heat in this field in Vermont.

Now, wedged among the ash and pine in the unsplit mound, he saw a perfectly round log, one of the infrequent pieces of cedar he encountered. He tugged at it, the muscles in his powerful-looking arms straining, and at length he pulled the log out. He put it on the chopping block and split it cleanly in half. The cleft pieces fell evenly on either side of the block; the faint smell of cedar came to him from the split pieces as he picked them up and threw them on a small pile close to the block.

He smiled and rested his ax on the block and looked out dreamily over the gently down-sloping fields. After a few moments he straightened up, squaring his broad shoulders, looking as if he were coming to sudden attention, or were about to start setting-up exercises.

"Iambic tetrameter," he commanded himself aloud. Then he waited for the words to come into his mind. When they had, he said them out loud, stressing the accents.

*"The cèdar smèll within the lòg
Imprisoned thère full m àny a moòn."*

He took a deep breath and relaxed and sat down on

the block. He smiled. No doubt of it. They were really becoming his. No; they *were* his. All the stumbling and fumbling and faltering gone. Gone, gone, gone. All gone. There was hardly a pause now—not for days. He could command the experience *and* the rhythm. “It will take practice,” Drum had said. “They all practiced; Frost, Keats, all of them.” Ah, Drum, Drum, Drum. Oh true “*Primus*; you must learn to turn the whole world of experience in the proper rhythm *for* that experience,” Professor Drum had said. “And that takes practice. Nobody comes by this art naturally.”

The young man stood up and did a very small dance for the smallest second, moving only his feet. Then he held an imaginary football in front of him and gave it an enormous punt. Then he stood still.

One more and back to work. He came to attention. Subject? The way the line of trees in the distance met the fields.

“Trochaic trimeter,” he said. This was always a tough one. But again the words shaped themselves quickly and he said them out:

*“Boùndary lòved by màn and
Nàture; line that màrks our
Oùter woods; dàrksome boùndary
Whàt’s your meàning, dùm dee
Dùm dee dùm dee dùm.”*

As he finished he heard the faint pad of footsteps coming around the great mound of unsplit wood. And then a young boy appeared. For a moment he didn’t recognize the child. He was a blond, round-headed, round-faced boy, eleven or twelve years old, with intensely blue, deep-set eyes and very red cheeks, cherubic. And he carried a large black notebook in his left hand.

“Hello,” the boy said. He looked very formal and polite, his neck stiff, his cheeks gelid and his eyes not quite free to look the other in the eye. “Are you Cousin Jack?”

“Oh,” the young man said. “You’re Guy. For heaven’s sake. I knew Aunt Jen was coming but I didn’t know—ah—whether she’d bring you or not.”

The boy nodded. “Yes,” he said. “We got here about

an hour ago. And your mother said, I mean Aunt Mary said, to come out and say hello."

"Oh that's fine, Guy," Jack said. He looked at Guy intensely. "How you've grown," he said. "I wouldn't have recognized you." He paused, thinking, and then he said, "I guess it's been—oh—two years since I've seen you."

"Three," the boy said. "You were still at college when we came last year."

"Yes," Jack said. "Well." He paused. "Sit down," he said and indicated the chopping block and Guy sat there, still stiff and diffident, formal, now holding the large notebook on his lap. Jack sat on the ground and leaned against the pile of uncut logs. He cast about for something to say, but before he could speak the young boy said, chattily formal now, as if *he* were responsible for the conversation: "Aunt Mary says you're working for your father. I mean summer's working, because you're helping pay for your college."

Jack smiled. "I'm his chief woodcutter," he said.

The boy nodded. "And she says your father is paying you just as much as he'd pay anybody else."

Jack laughed slightly. "Yes," he said, "and I work for it." He motioned toward the mountain of split logs. "Look at that pile."

The boy looked toward the pile and shook his head. "It's huge," he said. A little of his formality was dropping from him now, his cherubic cheeks looked a little less frozen and his eyes a little freer. "I imagine it's very good for your muscles," he said.

"Oh yes." Jack flexed his muscles, smiling with a slight self-mockery. "Football." Then suddenly he remembered something and he looked at Guy almost guiltily. He waited for a moment and then he said, "You certainly don't *look* as if you'd been sick," he said. "You look pretty fit and healthy."

"Oh yes," the boy said promptly. "I am." And then as if repeating something heard from a grown up—"I've been very lucky; very, very lucky."

"Mother said there were hardly any after-effects. Just a little in—ah—your hand."

"No, not my hand," Guy said, "just in here a little." He balanced the notebook on his knees and touched his

right wrist and forearm with his left hand. "My fingers are still weak, but that's really the muscles in the arm. I mean I can do everything with them, but they feel a little weak."

"I see," Jack said. "Mother said they're going to get all better—muscles are going to get all better. They're going to recover completely. That's right, huh?"

"Yes," the boy said. "They're almost all better now. I just have to keep exercising them."

Jack shook his head. "You *are* lucky," he said.

"Yes," Guy said. "I'm very, very lucky."

They paused for a moment. Jack could see that the boy had lost his stiffness and formality now and felt very comfortable and this made him go on with the subject.

"What exercises do you do? Sports and things?" he asked.

"Oh I can do those. But the main thing is the hand exercises—like I have a rubber ball I squeeze five hundred times a day. And then I'm supposed to draw—pictures and things. Doctor Carlson says that's good exercise too. And it's not so boring as squeezing the ball, Doctor Carlson says."

"In other words, keep that hand going as much as possible?"

The boy nodded. The conversation paused again and then the boy said, "Could I help you pile the wood or something?" Jack looked at the accumulation of split logs near the chopping block and then at his wristwatch. "OK," he said. "And then we'll go in to lunch. It's nearly noon."

Guy stood up, forgetting the looseleaf notebook on his lap, and it fell at Jack's feet in a flutter of pages and lay open on the ground. Jack leaned over to pick it up, and as he did so he had to suppress a smile forcibly. The picture on the open page was clearly a tracing in pencil, not a drawing at all; it was a tracing of some famous picture, two lines of beautiful trees, bowed in a heavy wind; he could almost but not quite remember who had done the original painting. Not Cézanne's *Chestnut Trees*. What? The trees in the tracing had a strange quality, lyrical. Even so, Guy's hand couldn't be all that weak to trace as firmly and clearly as that.

He handed the notebook back to the boy still open to the trees. "That's very good," he said, indicating the picture.

Guy smiled, his round, red cheeks glowing with pleasure, his intense blue eyes delighted. "Oh that's not my best one," he said. He paused. "I've drawn many better ones than that." He looked down at the open book as if he were about to show some others, but Jack had moved away toward the mound of split logs and the boy closed the notebook and put it on the chopping block.

When he got the chance, Jack thought, he'd tell the boy, very gently of course, that he must not pretend he drew pictures when he really just traced them. Or perhaps—no, perhaps better to say nothing. Guy had been so sick. He rated a few peccadilloes, at least for a while.

They started then throwing the newly split wood that lay close to the block onto the great pile, the round-faced boy imitating Jack's slow, measured manner of heaving the logs, two at a time, one in each hand. They worked in silence for a while and then the boy said, "I heard you saying something when I came out. Were you memorizing something for college or something? It sounded like that."

Jack smiled slightly. "No," he said, "I was practicing."
"Practicing what?"

Jack threw his two logs on the pile and looked at Guy, pleased and touched. How quickly children could move into a friendship, lose their pristine shyness, ask the innermost of questions. "Well, it's complicated," he said.

"You mean you were practicing something for college?" Guy said. "I can understand college things; some. You know my brother goes to college now."

"Jim?" Jack said. "Oh yes. Dartmouth."

"Yes. Well, when Jimmy came home this summer he showed me a paragraph in that book—oh, what's it called—I forget, some philosophy or something—and asked if I could tell what it meant. I read it and told him and he said it was exactly right and he said besides it was a very hard paragraph and they had it on a test. I mean they had to tell what it meant on that test."

"Is that so?" Jack said.

"That's not the first time he's tested me. He's tested me

a lot. On other things he has in college. And I can always understand them." He paused and corrected himself. "Usually," he said.

"I see," Jack said. He would be able to have no reservations in this friendship; that was clear. He sat down on the chopping block. "Well, what I was doing wasn't really deep—not like philosophy."

"Oh it wasn't?"

"I was practicing poetry."

"That's what it sounded like. Reciting."

Jack thought about the whole thing for a moment. What would a child's reaction be to a poet? It would be interesting to see anyhow. "No," he said; "not reciting it. I was making it up."

The young boy showed no surprise; he pondered the statement. Then he said, "Why out loud? I'd think you'd write it down on paper."

Jack smiled. "I do that too," he said. "Only I was practicing getting the right beat." He hesitated. Well, he'd gone too far to drop the subject and not far enough to make it clear. He tried to think of a way to explain it, but before he could the young boy said, "Oh I know about beats. We had it this year. You mean like the sound of hoofbeats, or the wind or something. We had to learn a poem, *Evangeline*. It's supposed to sound like the wind in the trees, I think."

"Yes," Jack said. "To some extent. Did you learn any others?"

"No."

"Well, there are a lot of different beats. I mean take *Evangeline*. It goes. '*This is the forest primeval.*' The beat is dùm dee dee, dùm dee dee. Dactylic. It's called dactylic."

"You mean that's what the *beat* is called?"

"Yes," Jack said. "And then there are other beats. There's dee dùm, dee dùm, dee dùm. That's called iambic. And dùm dee, dùm dee, dùm, dee, dùm dee. That's trochaic. And so forth."

"I see," the boy said. He thought for a moment and then he said, "*Evangeline* is supposed to sound like the wind in a forest or something. And then there's another one that sounds like a horse galloping."

"Lochinvar?"

The boy smiled. "Yes, that's it." He paused. "Well what I want to know is are all the beats supposed to sound *like* something?"

"Oh no."

"Then why do you use them?"

Jack smiled; good; very smart boy. "That's a very good question, Guy." The boy pressed back a small smile of pride at the praise. "Well, I suppose the answer is that for hundreds of years poets have found the best way to express certain things, I mean feelings or thoughts or whatever, is with these beats." He paused a little uncertainly. "Say you want to write a sad poem or a happy one—the beats help you express your feeling."

Was that clear? Was that anywhere near enough?

But Guy seemed satisfied. "And so you were practicing them so you can use them if you want to make a sad poem or something?" he said.

Jack nodded vigorously. "Yes. The beats have to become second nature to a poet, so he can say anything he wants in them. Anything he thinks is a poem anyhow."

They heard the far-off clang of a bell and Jack said, "Ah, lunch." He stood up and put on a sweatshirt that lay across the stacked pile. As he did so, Guy said, "What would be a good example of a beat somebody used—I mean some poet, to say something in? I mean one you liked."

"Oh——" Jack cast about in his mind; *Tell me not, sweet, I am unkind? No. Let me not to the marriage of true minds? No.* Something simple, with a little story perhaps. "I'm thinking," he said. And then, after a moment, he said, "Ah, here's one. A poet wrote it when he was very old." Jack recited it, stressing the accents slightly so that Guy could hear them.

*I strove with none, for none was worth my
strife;*

Nature I loved; and next to Nature, Art.

I warm'd both hands before the fire of life;

It sinks, and I am ready to depart.

"That's iambic," Jack said. "The poet picked exactly

the right beat. Dee dùm, dee dùm, dee dùm, dee dùm. '*I strove with none, for none was worth my strife.*' "

Guy thought for a moment. "How does that second line go again?" he asked.

"*Nature I loved; and next to Nature, Art.*"

"Well, that doesn't start dee dùm, dee dùm. That starts dùm dee, dee dùm."

Jack looked as if he were going to hug the boy; he smiled broadly and proudly at him and leaned toward him. "What an ear you've got," he said delightedly. "How did you remember that offbeat?"

The boy shrugged, again suppressing the happy smile at the praise. "Oh, I beat it out as you went along," he said.

"That's remarkable," Jack said. "It's really remarkable. You have a real sensitivity to rhythms." He paused. "Yes," he said, "often the poet puts in an offbeat like that so his beat doesn't get monotonous—or some other reason."

They started toward the house, now visible in the distance across the fields, walking in silence for a little while.

Jack was excited about the boy's sensitive ear. And a little puzzled. He must have something basic in his nature, basically responsive. How could he have picked up that offbeat? Just hearing the poem, too, not reading it. And hearing it for the first time too. It was amazing. That was the same kind of sensitivity Professor Drum told him he, Jack, had. But at Guy's age?

Guy spoke first. "Are you going to be a poet all your life?" he asked.

Jack smiled. "Yes," he said. "That's what I've decided."

"When did you decide?"

"Just this year."

"What made you?"

Jack thought: "Well," he said in a moment, "I realized in this class I had that I loved poetry. I mean I could really *feel* it. And the more I read and thought about it the more I loved it. And then there was this wonderful teacher, Professor Drum, who taught us and I wrote some

for him. And then I decided. This was what I wanted to be. A poet."

Guy smiled happily. "I'll bet you were really good," he said.

Jack looked at Guy sideways and his eyes went to the looseleaf notebook the boy carried at his side, and he recalled the picture of the two lovely lines of trees he had seen on the page when the notebook had fallen to the ground open; perhaps this was the time to correct the boy's attitude, catch him up in that little lie about having drawn the trees.

"No," Jack said. "I wasn't very good. I wasn't terrible. But I wasn't particularly good."

Guy looked at him, shocked. "What do you mean?" he said.

Jack spoke gently. "Nobody's good to start with, Guy. Not really good. Nobody's good at anything without practice. I have the ear, yes. Professor Drum told me that. And I have the appreciation." His voice became firmer now, and not so gentle. "And I know I want to *be* a poet. But to be one is going to take a lot of work. Work, practice. Work, practice. That's what you have to do when you want to become *anything*."

Guy looked worried. Or was it puzzled? "But what if you worked and worked and then you still weren't very good? I mean not really good?"

Jack smiled. "I could face that if it happened," he said. "But it's not likely. Practice will do it."

Guy still didn't look satisfied. "But shouldn't you have a sign or something? I mean that you can become the thing you want to be?"

"You mean a poem that somebody thought was really good?"

"Yes."

"No," Jack said. "You don't need to have that. A man can become anything he wants."

Guy shook his head in wonderment, but his expression of concern dissolved now. Then he said, "Maybe that's what I'd like to be too."

"A poet?"

The boy nodded. "I'll try one. I'll try that dee dùm dee

dùm dee dùm dee dùm dee dùm beat. The one the old man used."

Jack smiled. "Iambic," he said.

"Yes."

"Why not?" Jack said.

"I'll do it after lunch in my notebook." He was excited. "Then I'll bring it down and show you. And we can go on talking and stuff." He paused thoughtfully, then said, "How many lines should I do?"

"As many as you need to get your feeling out, your meaning out."

"I think I already know what I'll do it about," Guy said. "It should be around"—he calculated—"about sixteen lines."

They were silent for a few moments and then Jack said, "Don't expect too much of yourself. I mean it probably won't come out just as you planned it. Don't forget it takes practice."

Guy looked up at him again, again slightly puzzled. "Maybe it won't," he said. "Maybe it'll come out perfect. My drawings didn't take any practice. I mean I could just *do* them, that's all."

Jack thought; yes, definitely, definitely, he must call the boy on this now. Guy was charming and bright certainly; but this self-lie, this necessity to maintain this picture of himself, was a flaw. It was almost a delusion.

"Guy," he said, making his voice as soft and uncensorious as possible. "You really shouldn't call those things in your notebook drawings."

Guy looked up at him, his round face inquiring. "Why not?" he said.

Jack suddenly remembered he had seen only one picture, the one of the trees. "Well, perhaps some of them are drawings," he said, "but the one I saw, the trees in the wind; that was a tracing. And you said you drew it."

Guy stopped, looking at Jack now in pure pleasure, beaming. "I *did* draw it," he said. "It *isn't* a tracing. It's my own drawing. I did it with a pencil."

Jack looked at him; this was really serious. Good Lord. He *knew* those trees, that drawing. He had seen it

fore. "With a pencil and a piece of tracing paper, Guy," he said as gently as possible.

Guy shook his head vigorously and laughed delightfully. "No," he said, "no. I did them myself. My mother and some other people thought I traced them too. But I didn't. I drew them. They're some trees I saw in the path to the dump near my house." He paused, inexpressibly flattered and pleased at the strange expression of shock on Jack's face. "Here," he said, and he handed the notebook to Jack. "Take a look."

Jack took the notebook and held it uncertainly.

"Start at the beginning," Guy said. "You'll see."

Jack opened the notebook to the first page. It contained a pen-and-ink sketch of a table with a bowl of fruit on it. It was scrawly and roughly done, a child could have done it; the legs of the table were skewed and the fruit bowl was above the table, floating in air, and the fruit was above the bowl.

"Now turn the page," Guy said.

The next page was the same drawing but this time there was a vast improvement—the table was in proportion, the legs firm little monoliths, the bowl firmly placed on the table and the fruit within it.

"Turn the page again," Guy said.

The same drawing; but now it was a beautiful and lyric sketch, mature; it was clearly no tracing but the astonishing development of the rough sketch on page one.

"I do them rough," Guy said, "and then I do them finished."

"How long did it take you to do the whole three?" Jack said.

"About two hours," Guy said. "About a morning."

"But you've practiced drawing before?"

"No, this is my first notebook. I never drew anything before until the doctor made me. I mean for my muscles, I know."

Jack thumbed through the notebook now. There was always a rough sketch or two and then the finished drawing; all of them were good, he could tell, and some were extraordinary, full of grace and of the beginnings of authority, immediate evocations. There was a fresco of running horses with intertwining legs, a marvel of lyrical

movement, and somehow highly simplified; there was another double line of trees more perfect than the one Jack had originally seen; several still lifes, quite heavy and real; amazing.

He went through the entire notebook in complete silence with Guy looking on, now silent himself, but his cherubic countenance beaming with pleasure. When Jack closed the book and returned it to the boy, he shook his head in wonderment.

"I'm very, very sorry, Guy," he said.

"Oh, that's all right," the boy said. "I sort of like it when people think I trace these things."

They were about fifty yards from the house now and they heard the lunch bell suddenly sound again. Looking up, they could see Jack's mother on the porch beckoning for them to hurry. They resumed their walk in silence.

After a while Jack said, "Those are really wonderful drawings, Guy."

"Thanks," Guy said.

"And you really never practiced drawing before?"

"No, honest. I could just do it right away." He corrected himself; "I mean almost right away. After a sketch or so."

After lunch Jack went back to work and Guy stayed on the porch to write the poem in iambics. At the woodpile Jack resumed his chopping at once. But a deep gloom, a black cloud of melancholy and despair had settled over him. This did not even start to lift until, coming across one of the rare cedar logs in the pile, he split it and put one of the cleft pieces to his face, inhaling the wonderful familiar odor. The fact that it was such a delight to him, this cedar odor, steadied him a bit and his dark mood began to lighten, though only slightly.

But he did not stop his work to practice his rhythms anymore. The only interruptions to his work now were when, every now and then, he moved for a moment to the edge of the great mounds of wood that obscured his view of the farmhouse to see if the cherubic boy were approaching with his sixteen lines of iambic poetry.

A Sacrifice

Isaac Bashevis Singer

THERE are among us some very strange individuals, and strange indeed are often their thoughts. In our house—No. 10 Krochmalna Street—actually sharing our hallway, lived an elderly couple. They were simple people. He was an artisan, or perhaps a peddler. Their children were all married. Yet the neighbors told that, despite their advanced years, these two were still in love. Every Sabbath afternoon, after the *cholent*, they would go for a walk—arm in arm. In the grocery, at the butcher's—wherever she shopped—she spoke only of *him*: "*He* likes beans . . . *he* likes a good piece of beef . . . *he* likes veal. . . ." There are women like that who never stop talking about *their* husbands. He, in turn, also would say at every opportunity, "My wife."

My mother, daughter of generations of rabbis, frowned upon the couple. To her such behavior was a sign of commonness. But, after all, love—especially between an elderly couple—cannot be dismissed so easily.

Suddenly a rumor spread that shocked everyone: the old people were going to be divorced!

Krochmalna Street was in an uproar. What did this mean? How could it be? Young women wrung their hands: "Mama, dearest, I'm going to be ill! . . . Woe, I feel faint!" Older women proclaimed, "It is the end of the world." The wrathful cursed all men: "Well, now, isn't a man worse than a beast?" Soon the street was aroused by an even more outrageous report: they were getting the divorce so that the old sinner could marry a young girl. You may well imagine the curses that were heaped upon the old man—a burning in his belly, a pain in his black

heart, a fire in his bowels, a broken arm and leg, plague, the judgment of Heaven upon him! The women folk spared no curse and prophesied that he would not live to see his wedding day, the old billy goat—instead of a wedding canopy he would find a black coffin.

In our home, in the meantime, the truth, the real truth came to light.

The old woman herself came to my mother and spoke to her in such a manner that my mother's pale face flushed with embarrassment. Although she tried to chase me away so that I would not be able to hear, I did listen for I was afire with curiosity. The woman swore to my mother that she loved her husband more than anything in the world.

"Dear lady," she argued, "I would gladly give my life to save a fingernail of his. I am, woe is me, an old woman—a broken shard—but he, he is still a man. He needs a wife. Why should he be burdened with me? As long as the children were still at home one had to be careful. People would gossip. But now what they say matters no more to me than the cat's meow. I no longer need a husband but he—may he be well—is like a young man. He can still have children. And now he has found a girl who wants him. She is past thirty; the time has come for her, too, to hear the wedding music play. Besides, she is an orphan and works for others as a maid; she will be good to him. With her he will enjoy life. As for me, I am provided for. He will give me enough to live on, and I do a little peddling on the side. What do I need at my age? I only want to see *him* happy. And he promised me that—after a hundred and twenty years, when the time comes—I will lie next to him in the cemetery. In the other world I will again be his wife. I will be his footstool in Paradise. It has all been settled."

The woman had come, quite simply, to ask my father to arrange the divorce and then perform the wedding.

My mother tried to dissuade her. Like the other women, my mother saw in this affair an affront to womankind. If all old men were to start divorcing their wives and marrying young girls, the world would be in a fine state. Mother said that the whole idea was clearly the work of the Evil One, and that such love is an impur-

thing. She even quoted one of the books on ethics. But this simple woman, too, could cite Scripture. She reminded my mother of how Rachel and Leah had given their maidservants, Bilhah and Zilpah, to Jacob as concubines.

Though I was a mere boy, I was not at all indifferent to this affair. I wanted it to come off. First of all, I loved to be present at a divorce. Secondly, at weddings I always got a piece of sponge cake and a sip of brandy or wine. And third, when Father earned some money, I would be given a few groschen to buy sweets. And then, after all, I was a *man*. . . .

When my mother saw that she could do nothing with the woman, she sent her in to my father, who immediately began to discuss the law. He warned her that after the divorce her former husband would be as a total stranger to her. She would not be allowed to remain under the same roof with him. She would not be permitted to speak with him. Was she aware of this, or had she imagined that she could continue to be with him? The woman replied that she knew the laws, but that she was thinking of *him*, not of herself. For him she was ready to make any sacrifice, even give her life. Father said he would give her an answer. Let her come back the next day.

After the woman left, Mother went into the study and began to argue with my father that she did not want him to earn money by such means. The old man, she said, was a woman-chaser, a mule, a vulgar person, a lecher. She said that if he were to grant this divorce and perform the marriage, the entire community would be aroused against him. Father left to go to his Hassidic study house, to talk the matter over with sensible men. There, too, a heated argument took place, but the final conclusion was that since both parties were in agreement, no one had the right to interfere. One scholar even quoted the verse: "In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thy hand. . . ." According to the Gemara this means that even an elderly man is still obligated to "be fruitful and multiply."

The next morning, when the old woman returned, this time with her husband, my father began to cross-examine her. I was sent out of the study. Father spoke gruffly,

sometimes slowly and sometimes faster, sometimes gentle and sometimes in anger. I stood behind the door, but could hear little. I was afraid that any minute now Father would burst out with: "Scoundrels, remember that Heaven has not yet abandoned his world to the rule of chaos! and chase them out, as was his custom with those who defied the law. But an hour passed and the two were still inside. The old man spoke slowly, in a broken voice. The woman pleaded. Her voice became softer and ever softer. I sensed that she was convincing my father. She whispered intimate secrets to him, such as a man seldom hears from the lips of a woman, such as are only rarely discussed in the heavy tomes of the Responsa. When husband and wife left the study, they looked happy. The old man wiped the sweat off his face with his kerchief. The woman's eyes glowed as on the night after Yom Kippur, when one feels assured that the prayers for a happy year have been answered. . . .

During the weeks that passed between that day and the wedding, Krochmalna Street gaped and wondered. The community was divided into two parties. The affair was discussed everywhere: in the grocery and at the butcher's at the fish tubs in Yanash's bazaar and in the fruit shop behind the markets; in the synagogues of the unlearned and in the Hassidic study houses where disciples gathered to tell of the miracles wrought by *their* Wonder Rabbi and to disparage the claims of all rivals.

Most excited, however, were the women. The old wife herself seemed to have lost all shame. She went around praising her husband's bride to the skies, brought presents for the "couple," busied herself with the wedding preparations as though she were the girl's mother. The other women scorned or pitied her. "Heaven help us—it just goes to show how an old woman can lose her mind!" All clung to the same idea: the old woman was crazy and the husband, the old sinner, wanted to get rid of her. All mocked her, all were outraged, all were puzzled. All asked the same question: "How can such things be? And the only answer was: "Well, you see . . ."

Had there been any young hooligans in the neighborhood, they might have molested the old couple or the bride, but our neighbors were quiet people. The husband

himself was a good-natured man with a white beard and the mild eyes of the very old. He continued to come to the synagogue regularly. He wound the leather straps of his phylacteries around his arm with a trembling hand. The youngsters made fun of him but he never showed anger. He touched the ritual fringes of his prayer shawl to his eyes. He kissed the phylactery that is worn on the forehead, and then that which is placed on the arm. A Jew remains a Jew, even when extraordinary events befall him. The truth was that it was not he who had talked his wife into this. On the contrary, it had all been her idea. He confided in my father. She had simply overwhelmed him. The girl was a poor orphan. The old woman herself went about happy, hopeful, smiling. Her eyes shone with a weird joy.

At the same time that husband and wife were preparing for the divorce and the subsequent wedding, they also purchased a cemetery plot. They invited friends there, to the place of eternal rest, and served cake and brandy. All was mixed up together: life, death, lust, boundless loyalty, and love. The old woman announced that when *his* wife would give birth she, the ex-wife, would care for the child because the young woman would have to help earn a living. Women who heard such talk spat out: "God help us! Heaven preserve us! May all evil dreams come upon them!" Others openly declared that these were the doings of the devil, of Satan himself. And yet there was something else. Although all were wholeheartedly against the marriage, they were eager for it to take place as quickly as possible. The entire street had been infected by a fever. Here life was presenting a drama more exciting than those one read about in the papers or saw in a theatre.

The divorce took place in our home. Two old people who had loved each other with a great love were now divorced. The scribe wrote out the document with his goose quill and wiped the ink on his skullcap. Every once in a while he would mumble something. His green eyes threw out sparks. Who knows? Perhaps he was thinking of his own "better half"? . . . The witnesses signed. The old man sat there, bewildered, his eyes veiled by his brushlike white brows. His beard lay flat against his

chest. It was clear that he, the chief protagonist, was as perplexed as everyone else. This idea had not been born in *his* head. From time to time he took a snuff of tobacco to relieve his dejection. Occasionally he would glance at his wife, who sat on the bench. Usually the participants in a divorce wear modest, even shabby, clothes, but the old woman had adorned herself with her holiday bonnet and a Turkish shawl. She replied to his gaze with a radiant look. Her eyes were simply sparkling with fire. "*Mazel tov!* See, I do everything for you, for you! I sacrifice myself for you, I sacrifice myself. Accept this offering graciously, my lord and master. . . . If only I could, I would bare my throat to the Reaper's scythe for you. . . ."

My mother paced impatiently up and down the kitchen. Her matron's wig was awry. An angry flame burned in her eyes. I entered the kitchen and asked for something to eat, but she exclaimed in vexation:

"Get out! Get out! Don't grab things from the pot!"

Even though I was only a small boy and her own son. I was at that moment for her a member of the despicable male sex.

I stood by while the old woman held out her wrinkled hands and the old man placed the writ of divorcement in them. My father then gave the customary instructions: that the woman may not remarry immediately but must wait for three months.

The old one with her toothless gums began to laugh. What an idea! She, thinking of remarrying?

I do not remember how much later it was, but I know that eventually the wedding also took place in my father's study. Under the canopy stood an old man and a stout young woman. Four men held the rods of the canopy. Father gave the groom and bride a sip of wine, but without a blessing. Everyone said, "*Mazel tov!*" and drank brandy with sponge cake. Then, in another room, a meal was served. The cooking and all the preparations had been done by the first wife. People said that the old woman had had vests, slips, and bloomers sewn for the bride, for the girl had no proper clothes to wear. So many guests came for the meal that all our rooms were filled and people were standing out in the hallway.

For some time longer Krochmalna Street continued to bubble and boil. People would run after the old man and his new wife and stare at them as though they were performing magicians or Chinamen with pigtails, such as occasionally came to our street to sell paper flowers. But after a while they found other things to talk about. After all, what is so unusual about an old woman losing her senses? Or an old man marrying a cook? People began to say that the first wife already regretted what she had done. The new wife did not give birth. The old man fell ill.

I regret, dear reader, that I cannot report a dramatic climax. Like everyone else, I too eventually lost interest. I only remember that the old man died not long after the wedding, and both women cried at the funeral. Then the old wife also breathed her last in some garret room. Even the fire of the Evil Inclination does not burn forever.

Whether husband and wife finally were reunited in Eden, and whether she there became his footstool, I cannot say. When you yourself arrive there—after a hundred and twenty years—ask for the mansion wherein dwell the former inhabitants of Krochmalna Street. . . .

Eskimo Pies

Robert Somerlott

DURING the worst of the Depression we lived in a mustard-colored house on Majestic Boulevard in Columbus, Ohio. This property was owned jointly by my grandfather and the Buckeye Home Loan Association. It was one of the better houses in the city's worst slum.

When I was old enough to feel shame, I began to lie about where I lived. The Bible I won for sterling character and perfect attendance at the First Methodist Sunday School is beautifully inscribed with my name and "621 Camelot Road." That happened to be the rather romantic address of Mrs. Ethel Muellenberg, principal at the South Ward Elementary School.

My grandfather was an anarchist without a bomb. He had outlived his generation of earth-scorching rebels and now dwelt in a curious era of his own where the events of the Haymarket Riot were as current as John L. Lewis. He had been left alone at the barricades, but he still sang loudly:

*They shot our boys at Leadville,
Our loyal Union sons.
But blood and fire will answer
The dirty bosses' guns.*

Before cancer finally got him, the tide of radicalism had ebbed, leaving him beached on an island with the lonely ghosts of Emma Goldman and Eugene V. Debs. My father drifted somewhere in the same political ocean, halfway between the island and the shore.

Our street was grandly called "Boulevard" because the Inter-Urban tracks ran down the middle, dividing it into two narrow belts of red brick. In summer, long after sundown its surface was hot enough to burn the soles of my bare feet. On these nights my grandfather, my father,

and sometimes one or two other workman would gather on our front porch and talk politics over glasses of home-brewed beer or spiked Kool-Aid. "If Barbara Hutton got only one dollar a day from every Woolworth store, she'd have more in a week than you'd earn in your whole goddamn lifetime," my grandfather said.

My father added, "The workingman don't have a prayer except his union. They think Roosevelt will do everything but wipe their noses for them. But it's only the CIO that'll put milk in the icebox."

I listened only on Monday nights, for on Mondays my mother worked overtime at the Snow-White Laundry, where she was a shirt finisher. Other nights she would take me to the sleeping porch at the rear of the house, and we would read aloud to each other. Usually we read from her favorite book, *The American Speaker*. The cover was adorned by a star-spangled Uncle Sam standing in a marble pulpit. His piercing eyes gazed heavenward at a wooden-looking dove that clung precariously by its beak to an unsuspended olive branch. Inside, the dog-eared pages contained about three pounds of nineteenth-century American verse. The flyleaf proclaimed that the selections were "appropriate both for recitation and meditation."

*Often I think of the beautiful town
That is seated beside the sea,
And oft in dreams go up and down
The pleasant streets of that dear old town. . . .*

The moth millers banged against the screens. The ancient electric fan buzzed fiercely, and my grandfather's voice rang from the front of the house. "God gave the earth to man. Just how much of it do *you* own?" But my mother and I heard only my thin voice chanting, "This is the ship of pearl, which, poets feign, Sails the unshadowed main. . . ."

My grandfather hated my mother, and I think he hated me. He would snarl at her, his voice deep in his throat. He sounded more like a dog than any other human being I ever heard.

"Fairyland," he snarled. "Sonofabitching fairyland is what you live in. And you've got the boy right there with

you. He don't know a goddamn thing about the world except Sunday school and la-di-da poetry. You'll both wake up someday, and I hope I'm here to see it."

My mother never answered back, but once I flew into a tantrum. "Don't you talk like that to my mother!" I shouted at him. "Don't you dare!" He only laughed and seemed to like me better for it. But my mother marched me to the kitchen table and made me stay in all afternoon, writing over and over again, "Be kind and be gentle to those who are old. For kindness is dearer and better than gold." That, too, was from *The American Speaker*.

The women who worked at the Snow-White Laundry quit at five thirty. An hour later my mother would get off the Inter-Urban. She looked cool in her clean white uniform and white shoes. A Negro boy on the street asked me if my mother was a nurse. "Yes," I said. "She's a nurse at the State Hospital."

At supper she would talk about the Snow-White Laundry and the women who worked there. She talked of Mary Tarkey, who was Polish and had B.O. but was lots of fun just the same. Then there was Pearl Mooney, a hillbilly from Tennessee who lived with her six children in a tar-paper shack on the edge of town. "They're poor people, but her oldest daughter plays the accordion and they sing together. Last week Pearl bought them 'a mess of hawg jowl.' They cooked it with dandelion greens the children dug up in the neighbors' yards. They all help each other, and they're all very happy."

The Snow-White Laundry was not always a safe topic. Sometimes it set my grandfather off into a lecture. "God-damn yellow-dog sweatshop! Slaving over some rich bitch's filthy underwear for a lousy seventeen cents an hour."

"Yeah," said my father. "Oughta have a union." He had been inside the laundry once when he was broke and had to get carfare. "No safety equipment. Oughta have a union."

My mother smiled brightly at me. "I don't think I told you about little Viola. She said the funniest things today. All about the Catholics—"

In July my father lost his job at the glass factory. "It's

on account of I was the second man in the shop to join the union. But they can't fire me. Those days went out with Prohibition. We got the Wagner Act."

But the days went by and there was no sign that the Talcott Glass Works had ever heard of Senator Wagner or his Act. My father became desperate. He urged my mother to write to Mrs. Roosevelt. "Maybe you could put the whole thing in rhyme, so she'd be sure to notice it." Perhaps it would be even better if I wrote, since Mrs. Roosevelt was known to love children. Somehow the letter was never written.

My father worked a few days on a huckster wagon, peddling vegetables from door to door. No one bought cabbage that week. And so it was decided that I would begin a modest career in business by selling ice-cream bars and Popsicles to the workers at the Snow-White Laundry. Both my parents coached me the night before.

"Take an extra clean shirt with you and keep it in your bike basket. Smile, and always say 'Thank you, sir' or 'Thank you, ma'am,' whether they buy anything or not," my mother said.

"Don't be afriad to *sell*. Speak up loud, and don't look scared green," my father said.

The Arden Ice Cream Company was downtown. My clean clothes were wet after I had bicycled four miles in the August morning. I went in timidly, clutching my previous capital in my sweaty hand. Eighty-seven cents would buy two dozen Eskimo Pies and one dozen Popsicles. The rest of the money would go for a quarter pound of dry ice and a cardboard box with a cord to go around my neck. A woman took my money and opened a thick door to an icy room full of mysterious equipment. "Two and one with dry," she yelled at a white-clad man. "And the kid's got no box."

A boy about twelve years old leaned against a steel table waiting for his day's supply. While our orders were being filled, we sized each other up. This boy seemed to have no parents to guide him. His pants were filthy, and my mother would have said he had enough dirt under his fingernails to grow carrots. Nevertheless, he spoke to me with the easy arrogance natural to a veteran.

"You new, kid?"

"Yes."

"Where you sellin'?"

"The Snow-White Laundry."

"I used to sell at the Eagle Laundry. Jeez, it gets hot in them places. The babes that work there don't wear no brassieres. Know what I mean?"

I nodded and tried to look wise.

"Some of 'em don't wear no panties, neither. If they're climbin' up the stairs, you can see Pike's Peak."

The white-clad man appeared with boxes, a small one for me and a huge one for my fellow salesman. "Here you are, Fergie," he said to the boy. "Six dozen pies, four pops, six extra for the Frees." He handed me mine without a word. "Thank you, sir," I said. He looked startled.

The boy Fergie took a stack of Eskimo Pies from his box and undid the silver wrappers with great care. "I'm takin' out the 'Free' slips. With every dozen there's one that's got a 'Free' tag inside the wrapper. If somebody buys that one, they're supposed to get another one free. So you just take out most of the slips, and who's the wiser?"

It was my first contact with the business world, and my shock showed on my face. "Christ, you're green," he said. "I'll bet you suck your mama's titty."

I got out as quickly as I could. I was helpless with anger, and at the same time felt a strange envy of this boy who could say anything he wanted to and who seemed to know so much more than I.

The Snow-White Laundry was a squat two-story building whose white-brick front belied the ramshackle tin barn behind it. I parked my bike and walked slowly around the corner, completely bewildered. Should I just walk in the door and ask people to buy? What if someone told me to leave? What if nobody but my mother wanted an Eskimo Pie? I sat on the curb and dipped into my capital by eating a Popsicle. I examined the silvery contents of my box, which was misty now with thin smoke from the dry ice. Then I unwrapped bars until I found a "Free" slip, which I rolled into a pellet and threw in the gutter. The rewapping was a bit sloppy because my hands trembled at the boldness of my deceit. I walked

back to the laundry, more sure of myself than I had been all day.

Stifling heat struck me at the door of the workroom behind the office. The air shimmered around the great pipes that ran in every direction. They coiled out from a huge central tank like the arms of a white octopus, banded in asbestos. The wooden floor shook with the thunder of flatwork presses. At one of these a dozen women clustered, some feeding in wads of sheets while others pulled the hot, smooth linen from the other side. Several had discarded their uniforms and worked in sweaty slips. Clearly, none were nurses at the State Hospital.

One of them turned away from the machine to mop perspiration from her naked arms. I stepped toward her, suddenly realizing I had forgotten to change my shirt. "Good morning, ma'am," I said. "Would you care for an ice-cold Eskimo Pie or an orange Popsicle?"

"Huh?" she said. I repeated my question. "Naw, kid." She yelled over her shoulder. "Any you girls wanna buy ice cream?" No one looked up. "Naw, kid." She turned her back on me before I had time to say, "Thank you just the same, ma'am."

Washing was done in the basement. Steaming pools of water stood on the slimy concrete floor, and I felt my sox warmly wet through my sandals. Three light bulbs hung from damp cords, dimly illuminating a murky cavern lined by potbellied vats whose innards whirled and writhed, accompanied by the hiss of steam and clash of metal. I stood at the brink of a subterranean world and peered into its darkness while my ears were deafened by the crash of iron doors, the scream of gears, and the yells of its strange inhabitants, who moved mysteriously in and out of the shadows, communicating with each other by shouts and gestures. Only men worked in the basement.

The vat closest to me was attended by a fat worker in ripped white shorts. He had tied a dirty rag around his dripping forehead. As he hurled soiled clothes into the maw of the waiting vat, his wet breasts quivered. They were big and sagged like an old woman's.

"Eskimo Pie?"

"What?" he yelled.

"Eskimo Pie!"

"No. Makes you hotter." I started to leave. "Tell you what, kid," he shouted after me. "Get me a coupla cold beers and a coupla hot broads."

I climbed the two flights of stairs to the second floor weighed down by failure and embarrassment. In a moment I would see my mother. Although I had been told not to talk too much or distract her from work, I knew there would be time for the inevitable question, "How many have you sold?"

The second floor had open windows. There was light and even a bit of air. The hot air still shimmered above the presses, but it was like ascending from hell to come here from the basement. My mother was bent over an ironing table in the far corner, one of five women who stood at the end of a long production line in which each machine ironed a different part of a shirt. She was wearing not the starchy uniform she always came home in but a limp white garment open halfway down the front.

I began at the opposite end of the room. I said the most fervent prayer of my life. And I sold nothing. My empty pockets were heavy as I approached my mother. She buttoned her uniform as she turned to me. "Hello, dear. How many have you sold?"

I could only shake my head.

"Then I'll be your first customer." The nickel she slipped into my empty pocket was a token of my complete failure. I wanted to throw it on the floor. I wanted to cry. "Now ask the other girls," she said quickly. I made my way slowly down the line.

"Eskimo Pie? Eskimo Pie?"

"Why, I think that'd be real good," a small woman said, turning from a great press that clamped down on shirt bosoms. I knew from her words that she was going to buy, and I knew from her accent that she must be Pearl, the hillbilly with all the children who were so poor but happy. "I hope I'll get one of them free ones. Two'd be real good." She handed me a dime, and I gave her my mother's nickel for change. I forgot to say "Thank you, ma'am."

She returned to her machine, holding the Eskimo Pie in one hand, and deftly straightened a shirt with the other. I was only a few steps away when I heard her

scream. She screamed and screamed. I stared dumbly at the ice cream on the floor and watched her kick at the pedals of the great press that locked her right hand in its searing jaws. Her free arm beat and flapped, pounding helplessly at the metal.

Everyone seemed to be shouting. A man plunged past me, knocking me down and scattering my ice-cream bars. I began to gather them up again. The man was now leading the woman away from the press, holding her up with both arms and saying, "You're all right, Pearl. You're all right." But she did not stop screaming.

Suddenly my mother was beside me. She seized my shoulder with strength I never knew she had. "Get home." Her voice was harsh. "Get home." I ran down the steps to the street, the box that hung around my neck banging against my stomach.

But I did not go home. My grandfather would be there, and maybe my father. I went to Denham Playfield and watched the little kids climb the monkey bars. I sat on the cement railing by the broken fountain all afternoon, while the dry ice in my box slowly evaporated and the Eskimo Pies melted to a soggy slop. Not until suppertime did I go back to Majestic Boulevard, leaving my ruined merchandise for the black ants to find and eat.

We did not talk much at supper. There was a hard look to my mother's mouth, and my father and grandfather seemed uneasy. They spoke only of the August weather and the unusual number of lightning bugs. Then they went to the front porch.

"Should you read first, or should I?" my mother asked.

"You read first."

As soon as she turned on the light in the sleeping porch, the millers began to bang against the screen. She opened the *Speaker* and read.

*There's no dew left on the daisies and clover,
There's no rain left in Heaven.
I've said my seven-times over and over,
Seven times one are seven.*

I heard the clink of a beer bottle on the front porch. I could hear my grandfather's voice droning on. I could hear my mother reading, but I was not really listening.

The Visit

Elizabeth Spence

THE children were playing through the long empty rooms of the villa, shuttered now against the sunlight during the hottest hour of the day. The great man had gone to take a nap.

Before she had come to Italy, Judy thought that siesta was the word all Latins used for a rest after lunch, but she had learned that you said this only in Spain. In Italy you went to *riposarsi*, and this was exactly what the great man had done.

It was unfortunate because Bill had built up so to this visit. To be invited to see Thompson was, for almost anyone in the academic world, the token of something superior; but in Bill's particular field, it was the treasure, the X mark on the ancient map.

Judy often thought that Bill had an "and-then" sort of career. Graduate course, a master's degree. A dissertation, a doctorate. A teaching appointment, scholarly articles. And then, and then. Promotion, the dissertation published, and clearly ahead on the upward road they could discern the next goal: a second, solidly important, possibly even definitive book. A grant from the Foundation was a natural forward step, and Bill then got to take his wife to Italy for a year. In Italy, as all knew, was Thompson.

Bill and Judy Owens had arrived in October; now it was June. All year Bill had worked on his book, the ambitious one, all about ancient Roman portraiture; Judy had typed for him, and manuscript had piled up thick. They went about looking at museums, at ancient ruins and new excavations. They met other attractive young

American couples who were abroad on fellowships and scholarships, studied Italian, attended lectures, and frequently complained about not getting to know more of the natives.

But all the time Bill and Judy did not mistake what the real thread was, nor which and-then they were working on now. The book would get written somehow; but what prestige it would gain for Bill if only he had the right to make a personal reference to Thompson even once—and more than once would be overdoing it. Should it go in the introduction, or the preface, or the acknowledgments, or the text itself? This would depend on the nature of what Thompson, at last, yielded; and did it matter so much where the single drop of essence landed, when it would go to work for one anywhere, regardless?

Bill was always thorough—he was anything but aimless; but in this matter he became something he had never been before: he grew crafty as hell. He plotted the right people to write and the best month for them to receive a letter. He considered the number of paragraphs which should go by before Thompson was even mentioned. In some cases Thompson's name was not even allowed to appear; yet his presence (such was Bill's skill) would breathe from every word. Pressure could be brought to bear in some cases: Bill had not been in the academic world fifteen years for nothing; and everything in American life is, in the long run, as we all know, competitive. He poked fun at his scheming mind—yet the goal was important to him, and he pressed forward in an innocent, bloodthirsty way, as if it were a game he had to win.

At last, in May, just when it seemed that nothing would happen, a letter arrived from a Professor Eakins, Bill's mentor in graduate school. "By the way," Eakins wrote (after a certain number of paragraphs had gone by), "I had a letter from Thompson recently saying that if any one of my students would be in the neighborhood of Genoa during June, he would be most welcome at the villa. I could think of no one I would rather have call on him than you, Bill. Of course, if you are planning to be in Sicily at that time, you'll let me know, so that——"

But Bill was not planning to be anywhere near Sicily in June.

From Genoa, in June, Bill and Judy had gone straight to the village in the mountains nearest to Thompson's villa. This village was the usual take-off point for people who went to see Thompson. Judy had pointed out that another village nearby had, according to the guide book, a more interesting church, with a cosmatesque cloister and a work in the baptistry attributed by some to Donatello (Judy loved Donatello), but Bill decided that there was no time for anything unorthodox. So they went to the usual village.

All kinds of legends were attached to the place. Some people had waited there for a week or more in the only halfway decent *pensione*, had dispatched all the proper credentials to the villa, but had never received any word at all. They had finally had to leave, looking out of the rear window of the taxi all the way to the station, until the mountain shut out the village forever. But no one could ever be personally encountered to whom anything of the sort had happened, and Bill had decided that it was only a Kafka-like nightmare which had accrued of itself to the Thompson image—he put it out of his mind by force.

He refused to recall it, even after he and Judy had sat waiting in the village for two days. He read the books he had brought to read, and Judy typed the chapter she had brought to type; then they proofread it together. They went out in the evenings and ate outdoors before a little restaurant under a string of colored lights. Here Judy, who got on rather well in Italian, answered all the waiter's questions about their son Henry, who "had" nine years and was now in care of his aunt in the *Stati Uniti*. The waiter said that she was much too young to have a nine-year-old son, and that her husband was a great scholar—one could see it *sùbito*. Judy enjoyed herself and drank up most of the wine. Light lingered in the mountains. They walked around and looked down at the view, an aspect of a splendid, darkening valley.

Bill threw himself down on a bench. Perhaps, he reflected aloud, Eakins was the wrong one to recommend him to Thompson. Who, after all, valued Eakins' work as highly as Eakins did? Eakins' large, fleshy, cultivated face all but materialized, with the thin, iron-grey hair and the

thin waxed mustaches. It could be that Thompson thought so little of Eakins that any letter from or about Eakins could easily be tossed aside.

As he sat torturing himself this way, Judy leaned her elbows on the rough wall, looking far down at some twinkling lights. She said that if only they were religious instead of scholastic they would have come off better, since anyone at all could get an audience with the Pope. In fact, the problem seemed to be how to get out of one. In Rome, you might just pull a thread by accident and wind up buying a black veil and checking to see if you had the right gloves and shoes.

Bill said that scholastic was not the right word; it particularly connoted the Middle Ages. As Judy had finished only two years of college, Bill often had to put her right about things.

On their return to the *pensione*, the maid ran out and handed them a letter. "*È arrivata*," she said. It was somewhat embarrassing to be clearly seen through. Nonetheless, Bill's hour had struck. He and Judy were invited to lunch with Thompson on the following day.

Instead of driving their own car up to the villa, they took a taxi, as the proprietor of the *pensione* advised. He said that the way was extremely steep and dangerous. There were falling rocks, sharp curves, few markers. Their tires might be cut to pieces on the stones. Their water might boil away out of the radiator. They might lose the way entirely.

"How symbolic can you get?" Bill remarked. "Besides, this brother probably owns the taxi."

But all the proprietor said proved to be literally true. Bill and Judy were flung against each other several times on the curves. As the road threaded higher and higher, they dared not look out of the windows.

"I have to keep reminding myself," said Bill, shuddering away from a frightful declivity, "that this road may be leading me to the Thrace mosaics."

Judy knew about those mosaics, all from having typed so many letters. She knew as much as anybody. How they had been whatever the polite word was for smuggled out of the Middle East; how large the sums were that had

gone for them, some over tables and some under; how museums and authorities of every nation could agree on no one but Thompson to receive them. Now they were at the villa. Some visitors had been allowed to peep at them, some even to have a brief try, as with a jigsaw puzzle, at matching this to that—a foot here, an arm there, and what prestige when the thing was talked about afterwards!

"If only you could see them," Judy said.

"I can't think of any reason why I shouldn't," Bill said. The road had stabilized somewhat and he spoke with greater confidence, leaning back and crossing his legs. Judy smoothed her hair and agreed with him, then they were there.

The road flattened; a green plateau appeared before them, and set in it, at a fair distance, the villa. It looked like a photograph of itself. The tawny, bare façade was facing directly toward them. A colonnade ran out toward the left like a strong arm; it broke and softened the long, savage drop of the mountain behind and framed in a half-embrace the grassy courtyard. There in the background, hundred yards or so behind the villa, hung the ruin, the old castle. Rough and craggy, it was unused except artistically, as a backdrop, or to show people through (some visitors had reported being shown through), or perhaps for children to play in. Thompson's daughter, whose husband, the Prince of Gaeta, owned the villa, was said to have two children, and as if to prove that this was so they at once appeared, a boy and girl, both dressed in identical loose grey pinafores and long black stockings. They came out from among the shadows of the colonnade.

The radiator cap on the taxi had been removed for the journey, and Bill and Judy now chugged at a decorous pace into the courtyard, trailing a long plume of smoke. A dark man wearing English flannels came out of the villa and hastened to the colonnade, taking from behind a pillar a large green watering can. He poured water in the radiator of the taxi, then the cab driver handed him the radiator cap through the window, and he screwed it in place. "*È il principe*," said the driver, over his shoulder. The prince himself!

"*Buon giorno*," said the prince to the driver, sticking his head through the window.

"*Buon giorno, signor principe*," returned the driver.

"*Notizie?*"

Judy knew enough to follow that the prince was asking what was new and the driver was saying that nothing much was going on. Then the driver gave the prince a package of letters tied with a string.

The prince greeted his guests in English, opening the car door for them. The children had joined him and were standing nearby, side by side, looking at the newcomers with dark eyes, brilliant in their pale, inquisitive faces.

"Perhaps," said the prince, "you'd like to see our position before going inside?" He led the way across the courtyard to the right, where they saw the land drop completely away. Portions of a road, perhaps their own, could be seen arranged in broken bits along the sheer slopes, and far below, between boulders, they saw the silent blue and white curling of the sea. They were received in a small sitting room furnished with much-sat-in overstuffed furniture and opening out on a large terrace. The prince had them sit down and the two children, having been already formally presented in the courtyard, tucked themselves away on stools. Though they did not stare, they certainly watched: two more, they were clearly saying to themselves, had arrived.

Flashing dark, affable smiles, the prince said that he sometimes rode back down to the village with the taxi driver but that it must be hot below. Judy and Bill agreed: the nights were cool but at midday especially it was indeed hot below. Presently Madame Thompson came in—one said "Madame" instead of "Mrs." or "Signora" possibly to give her the continental flavor she deserved, though she was not French but German, and Thompson was American. Her long straight grey hair was screwed into a knot at the back. She was wrapped in a coarse white shawl. They should all move out to the terrace, she suggested, because the view was vunderful. They moved out to the terrace and soon two young women came in. The one with the tray of aperitifs was a servant; the other, the one wearing bracelets and smoking a cigarette, was Thompson's daughter, the princess.

From the opposite end of the terrace, making all turn, Thompson himself strode in.

He was grizzly and vigorous, with heavy brown hands. He wore a cardigan, crumpled trousers that looked about to fall down, and carpet slippers. He advanced to the center of the group and halted, squinting in the strong sun.

Judy dared not look at Bill. She had seen him at many other rungs of the ladder, looking both fearful and hopeful, both nervous and brave, in desperate proportion only Bill could concoct, and her heart had gone out to him. But now, as he confronted the Great Man at last, she looked elsewhere. She knew that he was transferring his glass to his left hand; she knew that his grasp would be damp, shaky, and cold.

Almost as much as for Bill, however, Judy was anxious for herself. Why, she now wondered, had she thought it necessary to look so well? Bill, in carefully pressed flannels, with crisp greying hair and heavy glasses, looked as American as naturally as a Chinaman looked Chinese, but with her the thing had taken some doing, and, inspired by the idea of helping him, she had worked at it hard. Brushes and bottles and God knows what had got into it and what with her best costume, cream-colored linen sheath with loose matching jacket, strand of pearls, gold earrings and shimmering brown hair, she looked ready to be mounted in an enlargement on a handsome page; but what had that to do with scholarship? The princess and her mother, Judy felt certain, did not own one lipstick between them. They dressed like peasants, forgetting the whole thing.

It's only that I know how little I know to talk about, Judy thought. That's why I was so careful. What if they found out about all those books I haven't read? She shook hands with Thompson, but didn't say anything: she only smiled.

Bill, who used to be good at tennis—he and Judy had met one summer on a tennis court—found a means of cutting off the small talk with an opening question like serve, something about a recent comparison of Byzantine and Roman portraiture. A moment later he was trotting off at Thompson's side, off toward the library, whi-

words like monograph and research grant, Harvard and Cambridge, frothed about in their wake.

Judy was left alone with the family.

She asked them about their daily routine. The princess said she went down each afternoon to bathe in the sea. "But how do you get down?" Judy wanted to know. "Oh, by a stairway in back of the castle. It's quite a walk, but good for my figure." "Then do you walk back up?" "Oh, no. There's a ski lift a half-mile from the beach. It lands me on a plateau, a sort of meadow. Beautiful. You've no idea. In the spring it is covered with flowers. I love it. Then I walk back through the castle and home."

"So there's skiing here, too?" she asked the prince.

"Oh, no!" said the prince.

"He brought an old ski lift home from the Dolomites," the princess explained. "Just so I could ride up from the beach."

"Do you have a farm here?" Judy asked.

"Oh, no!" said the prince.

"He did at one time," said the princess.

"At one, time, I did, yes. Then I spent some years in England. In England they are all so kind to the animals. Oh, very kind. When I came back for the first time I saw how cruel our peasants were. Not that they meant to be cruel. Yet they were—they were cruel! I tried to change them. But they would not change. So at last I sold the animals and sent away all the peasants."

"That's one solution," Judy agreed.

"He vill never eat the meat," said Madame Thompson. She smiled, deeply, like the Mona Lisa. "Never!"

"Oh, yes, the impression was a strong one. Also I am interested in Moral Rearmament. In England now there are so many thinking in this way. Now I will never eat meat again. To me it is eating flesh. *Carne!*"

It was not surprising, then, that they had *pasta* for lunch, followed by an omelet. Thompson sat at the head of the table.

"You should go to Greece," Thompson said to Bill. "Don't you plan to?"

"Greece isn't my field," Bill explained. "And of course my fellowship—"

"Fields and fellowships," said Thompson and gulped down some wine. "Fellowships and fields."

Bill remarked with a wry smile that Thompson himself had had one or two grants. "Oh, live on 'em!" Thompson cried. "Absolutely live on 'em! You people keep coming up the mountain—coming up the mountain. We must make it all work. How else?" His eye roved savagely around until it lighted on Judy: she felt as if her clothes were cracking suddenly away at the seams. Still observing her, Thompson said to Bill, "I'll tell you a subject that ten years ago, I wouldn't have given a second thought to—at your age I would have derided it. The relation of art to economics."

"Oh, Lord, no," said Bill at once. "Not after 'The Byzantine Aesthetic' "

"Very odd," said Thompson; "I feel exactly the same about one subject as the other." He sighed. "Well, don't tell Eakins on me, will you?"

"He'd think I was joking," Bill said.

"That summer in Paris," Thompson said, "when we met Eakins. When was that?" He addressed his wife. Madame Thompson had said nothing, it seemed to Judy since her remark about the meat the prince would not eat; but now she began with patient, devoted, humorless accuracy, to trace out what was wanted. Her voice rolled out in heavily muffled phrases, like something amplified through clouds.

"It was in 1927, the summer Eugene, your secretary for ten years, had died at Cologne of pneumonia on the last day of February. You decided to bring three articles later called 'Some Aspects of the Renaissance'——"

"God!" Bill breathed, showing that he recognized the title.

"——to rewrite in Paris. After Eugene's death you thought always of the sculptures in the Louvre."

Memory rushed into Thompson, a back-lashing wave. The wine of that long ago summer seemed to be crisping his tongue. "Oh, yes, and there was Eakins wanting all the same books as I in the Bibliothèque Nationale. He carried a sandwich in his brief case. Very poor. One meal a day. Some poule or other was giving him that. No fellowships then. Nothing but fields. Some very green."

He gave a short laugh. "I don't say he *read* the books, of course. That might be asking too much of Eakins."

The maid was putting the dessert around, a *crème caramel*. Thompson said he never ate dessert and went shuffling out in his carpet slippers. They all sat eating in silence. The princess said she would soon be going down for a swim if the Owens would care to join her. "I know I shouldn't so soon after eating, but the walk is good for me." She drew herself in smartly. Bill's refusal included the hint that he intended to have more of a talk with Thompson before the visit was over. "Oh, but he has gone to rest," they all said. "He must have his rest."

Bill looked concerned, and the prince promised to take him into the library, where Thompson would certainly come the moment he got up. Then the prince took Judy out to see his roses. The garden was in back of the castle ruins, in a sheltered area between the mountain and the ruined wall, opening out toward the South. The prince had gone to a great deal of trouble. Roses were especially hard to cultivate in Italy. But he had admired them so in England. His were ravishing—broad blooms of pink, white, red, and yellow. Here they could distinctly hear the sea.

In the pauses between his bits of information the prince looked inquiringly at Judy as if he was wondering if there was something else he could do for himself. His life so far would have been like the sweep of a windshield wiper. Of course he was a prince; of course, he had a villa and a castle, with the daughter of a famous man for his wife and roses and two beautiful children, and Moral Rearmament and English flannels, and if the peasants did not understand, he sent them away. If that was not enough, he did not eat the meat. Was there something else?

Judy noticed this, but felt on short acquaintance she really had nothing to suggest. She stood wondering whether, since the peasants and the animals were gone, the roses too were financed by the foundations, but she decided this line of thought was ungracious.

The children appeared from nowhere. "Now they will take you round the castle, if you like," the prince kindly said. "It is mainly in shadow, so you won't grow tired.

But mind you don't let them tempt you to climb. They love it, but they are like cats. Say, 'No no, come down!' "

He turned away, toward nothing.

Clambering around the castle, Judy came on a sort of enclosure, sunlit and quiet. She could smell warm earth beneath the grass. The air was sweet and soft, what Italians called *dolce*. There were some beautiful old broken chunks of ruin lying scattered about. Judy sat down on some ruined steps and rested her chin in her palm. The children called to her out of a tower but she said, "No, no, come down," so they did. The sky was radiant and gentle. She could glimpse the children at intervals, running past empty window gaps, until at last they leaped down on the grass before her.

Suddenly from behind the children, at a notch in the wall, the princess rose up. She was climbing; though as they could not see her feet, she seemed to be rising like a planet. She was rubbing her wet hair with a towel, and the sense and movement of the sea was about her.

Stopping still, she addressed a volley of Italian to the children. It would have been hard to convince anyone that her father was from Minnesota. Judy made out "*Che hai?*" "*Cattivo, tu!*" and "*Dàmmelo!*" which meant, she reasoned, that the children had something they shouldn't have which now was to be given to their mother. Then, as they at first hung back with their fists stuffed in the pockets of their pinafores, but finally obeyed, going forward and reaching out toward the princess, Judy glimpsed handful after handful of flashing blue stones, the purest, most vibrant blue she had ever seen. The color seemed to prank about the air for a moment with the freakish skip of lightning.

"Was the ski lift working?" a voice cried. Thompson himself was striding out to find them among the ruins. The princess came down from the wall and sat down quickly on a large fallen cornice. She had taken the stones, like eggs, in her towel, and now she quickly concealed them in it as well.

"It was working but not very well. It goes very *piano*. It also runs at an *angolo*."

"We must send Guiseppe down to look at the motor," Thompson said. "How was the sea?"

"Strong, but right," said the princess.

Judy saw by her watch that it was nearly three. Bill must be going nuts in the library, she knew; and here was Thompson grasping her arm and hustling her along a narrow path. They entered the villa by a side door and were at once standing facing one another in a narrow room with the remains of old frescoes peeling from the walls, a Renaissance chest in the corner and a cold swept fireplace.

Thompson placed a hand like a bear's paw beneath her chin; his coarse thumb, raking down her cheek from temple to chin, all but left, she felt, a long scar. "Beauty," he remarked. His hand fell away and whatever she was expecting next did not occur.

"My husband," said Judy, "is waiting to see you. You know, don't you, that he is a terribly important scholar."

"So Eakins said . . . but then I've never especially liked Eakins, do you? He says these things for some purpose. It is rather like playing cards. Perhaps it's all true. How am I to know? I was never a scholar." He confided this last somewhat eagerly, as though it had been the reason for finding her, and having her believe it mattered to him, Judy could not think why. He leaned back against the chest and folded his long arms. "You think I have to go and talk to him?" he debated with her. "You think that is the important thing?"

"I don't know. Oh, I really don't know!" She burst out with this—undoubtedly, the wrong thing—quite unexpectedly, surprising herself.

"Ummm," said Thompson, thinking it over. His eyes—large, pale, old, and, she supposed, ugly—searched hers. Unreasonable pain filled her for a moment: she longed to comfort him, but before she could think of how to, he tilted her head to an angle that pleased him, kissed her brow and shambled off, though in truth he seemed to trail a length of broken chain.

She was left to lose her way alone.

Corridors, wrongly chosen, led her to a room, a door, a small courtyard, a stretch of gravel, a dry fountain. She walked halfway to the fountain and turned to look back

at the façade, which like the other, was sunburnt and bare. It was surmounted by a noble crest, slightly askew—the prince's, doubtless. I should have told Thompson, she thought, that the children had got into the mosaics, but suppose it wasn't true? How could you say such a thing and not make an idiot of yourself if you were wrong?

As she stood, her shadow lying faithfully beside her in the uncompromising sun, a door in the wing to her left swung open and two Hindus, splendidly dressed, the man in a tailored dark suit wearing a scarlet turban, the woman in a delicate spangled sari that prickled over the gravel, walked past the fountain, past Judy, and disappeared through a door in the façade. She had raised her hand to them, she had called, but they had not looked up.

Bill was disappointed to the point of despair by his visit, which had yielded him only a scant half-hour with Thompson and a dusty monograph, published in 1928. Even the subject matter—Greek vase painting—was not in Bill's field. Thompson had told him seriously that for a man of his age, he had a wonderful liver. If Eakins had lived in Europe as long as he (Thompson) had, his (Eakins') liver would look like a bloody sponge.

"He's an organized disappointment," Bill complained, "and not very well organized at that. He didn't want to talk to me because he can't compete any more. He's completely out of the swim."

"I liked him," said Judy. "I just loved him, in fact."

"Doubtless. He has a taste for pretty girls. You overdid it, dressing so well. Did he chase you through the upstairs ballroom? That's what it's used for nowadays."

The taxi having reappeared for them promptly at four, they were now speeding down the mountain at a suicidal clip; they clung to straps beside the windows, where many a scholarly pair had clung before. Leaping rocks and whipping around curves, the cab clanged like a factory.

"The children had got into the mosaics," Judy shouted.

"What?" Bill yelled. And when she repeated it, "That can't be true," he answered.

"Did you see the Hindu couple?" she asked, as they sped through a silent green valley.

"No," said Bill. "And please don't describe them." He said that he had a headache and was getting sick. He wondered if they would return alive.

From the corner of her eye, Judy saw a huge boulder, dislodged by their wheels, float out into a white gorge with the leisure of a dream.

The Tea Time of Stouthearted Ladies

Jean Stafford

"As I tell Kitty, this summer job of hers is really more a vacation with pay than work. What wouldn't I give to be up there in the mountains away from the hurly-burly of this town! They have a lake right there below the main lodge where the girls can cool off after they serve lunch. And quite often they can have the horses to trot off here, there, and the other place—go down to Brophy, for instance, and have a Coke. They can help themselves to the books in the lounge, play the victrola, sit in the sun and get a good tan. They go to the square dances and dance with the dudes as if they were dudes themselves, and if there's a home movie they're invited to come and view. Mrs. Bell and Miss Skeen are very democratic along those lines and when they first hired Kitty, when she was just fourteen, they told me they didn't look on their employees as servants but as a part of the family."

"Not my idea of work," agreed Mrs. Ewing, and made a hybrid sound, half deprecating giggle, half longing sigh. "Some difference from *our* summers, what with those scorching days in August and no let-up in the way of a breeze. Oh, I'm by no means partial to summer on the plains. And all those pesky grasshoppers spitting tobacco juice through the screens onto your clean glass curtains, to say nothing of the fuss-budget old schoolmarms—give me a dude any day of the week sooner than Miss Prunes and Prisms from Glenwood Springs still plugging away at her M.A. after fifteen years. Kitty's in luck all right."

Lucky Kitty Winstanley, home from her last class for the day at Nevilles College, stood in the middle of her small, shadowy bedroom, her arms still full of books, and

listened to the voices in the kitchen below her. She visualized her mother and the turnip-shaped, bearded neighbor as they lingered in the bright hollow of the dying May afternoon. Their ration of ice-box cookies eaten, their pale, scalding coffee drunk, they would be sitting in the breakfast nook, facing each other through spotless, rimless spectacles. Their tumid hands mutilated by work would be clasped loosely on the tulip-patterned oil cloth and their swollen feet would be demurely crossed as they glibly evaluated the silver lining of the cloud beneath which they and their families lived, gasping for every breath. It was out of habit, not curiosity, that Kitty listened; she knew all their themes by heart and all of them embarrassed her. She listened with revulsion, with boredom, pity, outrage, and she moved stealthily so that they would not know she had come home.

Each afternoon, in one house or another along this broad, graveled street, there was such an imitation tea party in such a fiercely clean kitchen as Mrs. Winstanley's when two women or more established themselves in speckless cotton dresses in the breakfast nooks for a snack and a confab. United in their profession, that of running boarding houses for college students, and united more deeply but less admissibly in hardship and fatigue and in eternal worry over "making ends meet," they behaved, at this hour of day that lay tranquilly between the toasted peanut-butter sandwiches of lunch and the Swedish meatballs of dinner, like urban ladies of leisure gossiping after a matinee. Formal, fearful of intimacy lest the full confrontation with reality shatter them to smithereens, they did not use each other's first names, asked no leading questions; it was surprising that they did not wear gloves and hats. They did not refer, even by indirection, to personal matters, not to the monotonous terror of debt that kept them wakeful at night despite the weariness that was their incessant condition, nor to the aching disappointment to which they daily rose, nor to their hopeless, helpless contempt for their unemployed husbands who spent their days in the public park, clustering to curse the national dilemma or scattering to brood alone upon their individual despair.

Valorously, the landladies kept their chins up, ration-

alized; they "saw the funny side of things," they never said die. One would not guess, to listen to their light palaver, that they had been reduced to tears that same morning by the dunning of the grocer and the coal man and had seen themselves flung into debtors' prison for life. To hear their interchange of news and commentary on their lodgers, one might have thought they were the hostesses of prolonged, frolicsome houseparties. The cancer was invisible, deep in their broken, bleeding hearts.

They sat at the social hour of 4:00 to 5:00 in the kitchens because their parlors were either rented out or were used as a common room by the lodgers, but even in this circumstance they contrived to find expansive consolation. Often Mrs. Winstanley, sitting at attention on the stark bench, had said, "I can relax so much better in a kitchen." Did she think, her daughter wondered, that the repetition of this humbug was one day going to make it true? She sometimes went on from there to say, "When I was a girl back home in Missouri, we used to call our kitchen 'the snugger,' and we used it more than any other room in the house." As she complacently glanced around, her manner invited her caller to believe that she saw a Boston rocker and braided rugs, copper spiders hanging on whitewashed walls, a fireplace with a Dutch oven and cherry settles in the inglenooks, and a mantel crowded with pewter tankards and historic guns. In fact the caller looked on a room all skin and bones: a coal-oil range with gaunt Queen Anne legs, a Hoosier cabinet ready to shudder into pieces, a linoleum rug worn down to gummy blackness save in the places that were inaccessible to feet and still showed forth its pattern of glossy bruises—room, in short, in which there was nothing to recommend itself to the eye except the marmalade cake and the sunshine on the windowsill in which he slept.

But the neighbor conspiratorially played the game with her hostess, gladly breathed in these palliative fibs without which the ladies would have spent their days in tears. In one way or another, they had all "come down in the world," but they had descended from a stratum so middling, so snobbish, and so uncertain of itself that it had looked on penury as a disgrace and to have joked about it would have been as alien to their upright natures as it

would have been to say aloud the name of a venereal disease. They had come to Adams, this college town in the Rocky Mountains, from the South and the Midwest and New England, most of them driven there by tuberculosis in one member of the family, and, now that the depression had slid to its nadir and there were no jobs for their husbands, they had taken up this hard, respectable work.

They bore their shame by refusing to acknowledge its existence: except in the bitter caverns of the night when they reproached their husbands in unflagging whispers, too soft for the boarders to hear but not too soft for their own sons and daughters. For years, Kitty had heard these static diatribes coming up through the hot-air register from her parents' bedroom off the kitchen; sometimes they lasted until the coyotes howled at sunup in the foothills. Rarely did her ruined father answer back; all the charges were true, brutally unfair as they were, and he had nothing to say for himself. He was a builder, but no one was building houses these days; he had only one lung and so could not work in the mines. The oppressive facts of the depression and of his illness testified to his innocence, but his misery, so long drawn out and so unrelieved, had confused him until he was persuaded that he was jobless because he was no good at his work and he believed his wife when she, cruel out of fear, told him that if he had a little more gumption they would not have to live this way, hand to mouth, one jump ahead of the sheriff. Kitty hated her father's unmanliness (once she had seen him cry when a small roof-repairing job that he had counted on was given to someone else, and she had wanted to die for disgust) and she equally hated her mother for her injustice; and she hated herself for hating in them what they could not help.

In the daytime, the woe and bile were buried, and to her lodgers Mrs. Winstanley was a cheery, cherry-cheeked little red hen who was not too strict about quiet hours (their portable phonographs and radios drove Kitty nightly to the library) or about late dates.

With her friends, she liked to talk of her lodgers and of theirs: of their academic failures and successes ("I wasn't a bit surprised when Dolores got a con in psych," Kitty

once heard Mrs. Ewing-say, using the patois as self-confidently as if it were her own. "She told me herself that she hadn't cracked a book all term," and Mrs. Winstanley, au courant and really interested, replied, "But won't those A's in oral interp and business English bring her average up?"); they talked of the girls' love affairs, their plans for holidays, their clothes, their double dates. Gravely and with selfless affection, they told each other facts and sometimes mildly looked for overtones and meanings. Once, Kitty heard her mother say, "Helen went to the Phi Delt tea dance on Thursday with the boy in Mrs. McInerney's single front, but she didn't have a good time at all. She said afterward she was sorry that she had turned down an invitation to go to the show at the Tivoli, even though everyone said it was punk. Of course, I didn't ask any questions, but between you and me and the gatepost I think she was simply cutting off her nose to spite her face by going to the dance instead of keeping her regular date with her steady. Jerry Williams, that is that big tall engineer with the Studebaker."

They liked to speculate on the sort of homes their students came from; someone's mother's diabetes, someone's younger brother's practical jokes, someone else's widowed father's trip to Mexico were matters that mattered to them. They counted it an equal—and often thrilling—trade if one landlady, offering to her interlocutor the information that one of her girls or boys had been elected to Phi Beta Kappa, got in return the news that Helen or Joyce or Marie had been "pinned" with his Chi Psi pin by a prominent member of the football team.

It was not often that they discussed their own sons and daughters who were working their way through college, but when they did their applause was warm. They were, said the landladies, a happy-go-lucky bunch of kids (though serious in their studies) despite the fact that they did not belong to fraternities and sororities (and were known, therefore, as Barbarians) and could not have exactly the clothes they wanted ("But they keep warm!" the ladies cried. "And when you come right down to it, what else are clothes for?") and had to think twice about spending a nickel on a Coca-Cola. They mouthed their sweet clichés like caramels: "Anything you work hard for

means so much more than something just handed to you on a silver platter," "Our children's characters will be all the better for their having gone to the School of Hard Knocks," "For these youngsters of ours, Mrs. Ewing, the depression is a blessing in disguise."

With this honorable, aggressive, friendly mendacity, they armed themselves against the twilight return of their gray-faced husbands from the park and of their edgy children, exhausted from classes and study and part-time jobs and perpetually starved for status (they loathed the School of Hard Knocks, they hated being Barbarians) and clothes (a good deal of the time they were *not* warm) and fun. The husbands ate early, fed like dogs in the kitchen, and then, like dogs, they disappeared. Kitty's father spent his evenings in the furnace room where, under a weak light, he whittled napkin rings. But the landladies' sons and daughters, at the end of the day, became maids or footmen to the students whom they had earlier sat next to in Latin class or worked with on an experiment in chemistry. Kitty Winstanley, setting a plate of lamb stew in front of Miss Shirley Rogers, rejoiced that the girl had flubbed her translation in French and had got a scathing jeer from the instructor, but it was cold comfort because this did not detract at all from the professional set of Miss Rogers' fine blonde hair nor the chic of her flannel skirt and her English sweater on which, over her heart, was pinned the insignia of her current fiancé. Sometimes in the kitchen, as Kitty brought out dirty dishes or refilled the platter of meat, her mother whispered angrily, "Don't look so down in the mouth! They'll go eat some place where they can find a cheerful smile and then what will we do?" Blackmailed, Kitty set her lips in a murderous grin.

A little work never hurt anyone, the landladies assured each other, and if it was not Mrs. Winstanley yearning to trade places with Kitty in the debonair life she led as waitress and chambermaid at the Caribou Ranch, it was Mrs. Ewing, similarly self-hypnotized, enumerating the advantages that accrued to her asthmatic son in nightly setting up pins in a bowling alley. What a lark she made of it! And what a solemn opportunity. It was a liberal education in itself, according to his mother, for Harry

Ewing to mingle until 1:00 in the morning with coal miners and fraternity boys, a contrast of class and privilege she found profoundly instructive. A cricket match on the playing fields of Eton would not seem to offer more in the demonstration of sportsmanship than a bowling tournament between the Betas and the ATOs at the Pay Dirt Entertainment Hall. And, again, a stranger might have thought that Harry was only slumming when Mrs. Ewing spoke, with a sociologist's objectivity, of the low mentality and lower morality of the men from the mines and the scandalous girls they brought with them on Ladies' Night. She never touched upon the sleep that Harry lost nor on those occasions when a doctor had to be summoned on the double to give the pin boy an injection of adrenalin. "I do believe Harry's outgrowing his asthma," she said once, although that very morning Kitty had seen him across the hall in modern European history buffeted suddenly by an attack so debilitating that he had had to be led out by a monitor.

Kitty sat down at her study table and opened her Renaissance survey book to Donne, shutting her ears against the voices of the heroines below. But she was distracted and disconsolate, and the *Divine Poems* flew from her eyes before her mind could detain them. She turned to stare out of her narrow window at the sweet peas that her father's green thumb had coaxed to espalier the wall of the garage. Somewhere in the neighborhood, a music student was phrenetically practicing a polonaise, making villainous mistakes, and somewhere nearer a phonograph was playing "I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now," the singer's tribulation throbbing luxuriously in the light spring air. Beyond the garage, over the tops of the mongrel houses and through the feathery branches of mountain ash trees, Kitty could see the red rock terraces of the foothills and the mass of the range beyond where, in a high, wild, emerald and azure and bloodstone park, she would spend her summer.

She would not spend it exactly as her mother imagined. She thought of that lake Mrs. Winstanley so much admired, sight unseen, where the girls could swim after lunch if they were not repelled by the mud puppies that abounded in the icy water; and then she thought of the

lambent green pool in the main lodge for the exclusive use of the dudes. She thought of the one spooked and spavined old cow pony the kitchen help could ride if they wanted to go where he contrarily wanted to take them, up in the hot sage where the rattlers were or through thick copses of scratchy chokecherry or over sterile, stubbly fields pitted with gopher holes into which he maliciously stumbled when there was no need; and then she saw in her mind's eye the lively blooded bays and palominos that the dudes rode, never failing, as they mounted, to make some stale, soft-boiled joke about Western saddles. It was true, just as her mother said, that the help was asked to the square dances, only "asked" was not the right word; they had to go to show the Easterners the steps, and there could not have been any dances at all if Wylie, the horse-wrangler, had not been there to call the turns. And it was hardly like going to Paris to go down to Brophy, all but a ghost town, where the only buildings that were not boarded up were a drugstore, a grocery, the post office, a filling station, and a barber shop that was open on Tuesday and Saturday when an itinerant barber came to town. A handful of backward people, most of them named Brophy, lived in battered cabins in the shadows of the ore dumps of extinguished gold mines. In the wintertime, the story was, they often killed each other because they had nothing else to do.

The help at the Caribou blundered out of bed at 5:00 o'clock before the sun came up to begin a day that did not end until after 9:00 at night, a day filled, besides work, with the fussy complaints about their cabins and their food from the older guests, pinches and propositions from the randy younger ones (who were not that young). There was ceaseless bickering among the staff who, xenophobic, despised the dudes and, misanthropic, despised each other. The kitchen was ruled by a fat red cook and a thin yellow pantry girl who did not speak to each other although they glared verbosely across the room, the cook from under the lowering hood of her enormous stove, the pantry girl over the counter of her bailiwick, where the smell of rancid butter was everlasting.

Every morning, as the girls and the wranglers drowsed through their breakfast of flapjacks and side meat, Miss

Skeen appeared in the outer doorway of the kitchen, a homicidal German shepherd at her side (his name was Thor and he lived up to it; he had bitten many ankles and had abraded countless others), and boomed through the screen, "Howdy, pardners!" Miss Skeen, a tall and manly woman, combined in her costume the cork helmet of the pukka sahib, the tweed jacket of the Cotswold squire, the close fitting Levis and the French-heeled boots of the wry American cowboy, and the silver and turquoise jewelry of the colorful Southwestern aborigine. Her hair was short, her face was made of crags, she spoke in a Long Island basso profundo.

While Miss Skeen gave the men their orders for the day, her partner, Mrs. Bell, entered the kitchen to chirp admonitions to the female servants. Mrs. Bell was stout, small-mouthed, doggishly dewlapped, and she wore the khaki uniform of a Red Cross ambulance driver; her contribution to the Great War still gave her great satisfaction, and her memories of France, which were extensive and fresh, were ever on the tip of her tongue. Quite often she lapsed from Western into army lingo, called the dining room "the mess hall," asked a guest how he liked his billet, spoke of the wranglers as "noncoms." Her awful greeting was, "Cheerio, boys and girls! Everybody get out of the right side of bed this morning, I hope, I hope?"

The five waitress-chambermaids lived a mile from the main lodge down in a pine-darkened gulch in what had once been a chicken coop and what now Mrs. Bell archly called "the girls' dorm." The door still latched on the outside and the ceilings were so low that no one taller than a child could stand up straight in any of the three small rooms. There was an outhouse, vile and distant; they were so plagued by trade rats that they had to keep everything they could in tin boxes if they did not want to find their money or their letters stolen and replaced by twigs or bluejay feathers. At that altitude it was freezing cold at night, and the laundry stove in which they burned pine-knots could not be regulated, so that they had the choice of shivering or of being roasted alive. They had a little time off in the afternoon, but, as often as not, Mrs. Bell would dream up some task for them that she tried to make out was a game: they would have to go gather

columbines for the tables in the dining room or look for puffballs to put in the pot roast. It was exhausting work; sometimes, after a thronged weekend or a holiday, Kitty's arms ached so much from carrying burdened trays that she could not sleep, and through the long night listened anxiously to the animals gliding and rustling like footpads through the trees.

But, all the same, each spring for the past four years Kitty had been wild with impatience to get to the Caribou, to get away from home, from the spectacle of her eaten father and from her mother's bright-eyed lies, from all the maniacal respectability with which the landladies strait-jacketed the life of the town. The chicken coop was filthy and alarming, but it was not this genteel hygienic house in which she was forced to live a double life. At the Caribou, she was a servant and she enjoyed a servant's prerogative of keeping her distance; for instance, to the rich and lascivious dude, Mr. Kopf, a painter, she had been respectful but very firm in refusing to pose for him (he wanted to paint her as Hebe), had said, in a way that left no room for argument, "I have to rest in my time off, sir." But, at home, what could she do if a boarder, valuable to her mother for the rent she paid, asked for help with a translation or the loan of lecture notes? She could not put the girl, her contemporary and classmate, in her place by calling her "ma'am," she could do nothing but supinely deliver the lecture notes together with the dumplings or lend a hand with *De Amicitia* after she had taken to the various rooms the underwear and blouses her mother had washed and ironed.

At the Caribou, there was no one she knew in any other context. Her fellow waitresses were local mountain girls, so chastely green that they were not really sure what a college was and certainly did not care. They never read, but it did not embarrass them that Kitty did. At Christmas she exchanged cards with them but they did not exist for her, nor she for them, before the first of June or after Labor Day. And the dudes whose bathtubs she scoured and whose dietary idiosyncrasies she catered to came from a milieu so rich and foreign and Eastern that she could not even imagine it and therefore did not envy it.

Friendless, silent, long and exasperating, the summers,

indeed, were no holiday. But she lived them in pride and without woe and with a physical intelligence that she did not exercise in the winter; there in the mountains, she observed the world acutely and with love—at dusk, the saddle horses grazing in the meadow were joined by deer seeking the salt lick; by day the firmament was cloudless and blinding and across the blue of it chicken hawks and eagles soared and banked in perpetual reconnaissance; by night the stars were near, and the mountains on the moon, when it was full, seemed to have actual altitude. On these wonders, Kitty mused, absorbed.

The voices downstairs invaded her trance. She began to calculate in pencil on the margin to the left of "If poisonous minerals . . ." how many more hours there were to come before she got into the rattletrap mail coach that would take her, coughing spastically in its decrepitude, up the rivered canyons and over the quiet passes to her asylum. Her arithmetic did not deafen her. She heard:

"I grant you that the hours are long and the pay is low," her mother said, "but the Caribou attracts big spenders from the East and the tips more than make up for the poor wages. I don't mean your flashy tourists and I don't mean your snobby new rich but simply your settled, well-to-do people, mostly middle-aged and older. Mrs. Bell and Miss Skeen are cultured—went to boarding school in Switzerland as I understand it—and they are ladies and, as a result, they are particular about their clientele—absolutely will not tolerate anything in the least out-of-the-way. For one thing, they don't allow drinking on the premises, and anyone who breaks the rule is given his walking papers without any further ado, I don't care if his name is Astor or John Doe. And with all the beer-drinking and whatnot going on down here when those fast boys come flocking to town from heaven knows where in those convertible roadsters with the cut-outs open and those horns that play a tune, it's a comfort to me to know that my daughter is out of the way of loose living."

"Oh, I agree," said Mrs. Ewing, and Kitty could imagine her nodding her head spiritedly and shaking loose the bone hairpins that held her gray braids in place. "I happen to know that the drinking that goes on in this town is

decidedly on the upgrade. In these bowling alleys and so on, they spike the three point two with grain alcohol. And that's the very least of it. There are many, many ether addicts in the frat houses. Oh, I'm telling you, there are plenty of statistics that would make your hair stand on end. D.T.s and so on among the young."

For a few minutes then the ladies lowered their voices and Kitty could not hear what they said, but she knew the bypath they were joyfully ambling down; they were expounding the theory that beer drinking led to dope and dope to free love and free love to hydrocephalic, albino, club-footed bastard babies or else to death by abortion.

The fact was that both Mrs. Bell and Miss Skeen were lushes, and they fooled nobody with their high and mighty teetotal rule and their aura of Sen-Sen. The rule was at first a puzzle and a bore to the dudes, but then it became a source of surreptitious fun: outwitting the old girls became as much a part of the routine as fishing or hunting for arrowheads. For the last two years, Kitty Winstanley had acted as middleman between the guests and the bootlegger, Ratty Carmichael. There was local option in the state, but in Meade County where the Caribou lay there was nothing legal to drink but three point two. In an obscure, dry gully back of the cow pasture, Kitty kept her trysts with Ratty (his eyes were feral and his twitching nose was criminal) and gave him handfuls of money and orders for bottles of atrocious brown booze and demijohns of Dago Red. These he delivered at dinnertime when Miss Skeen and Mrs. Bell were in their cabin, The Bonanza, oblivious to everything but their own elation, for which excellent Canadian whiskey, bought honorably in Denver, was responsible. Kitty had no taste for this assignment of hers—she was not an adventurous girl—but she was generously tipped by the dudes for running their shady errands and for that reason she put up with the risks of it—being fired, being caught by the revenue officers and charged with collusion.

She smiled, finishing her multiplication. In 283 more hours, immediately after her last examination in final week, she would be putting her suitcase into the mail-truck parked behind the post office. And a good many of those hours would be blessedly spent in sleep. Then she'd

be gone from this charmless town on the singed plains where the cottonwoods were dusty and the lawns were straw. She'd be gone from the French dolls and baby pillows in the lodgers' rooms. And, in being gone, she would give her mother a golden opportunity to brag to the summer roomers: "Kitty has the time of her life," she could hear her mother say to some wispy, downtrodden school-teacher waif, "up there where the ozone is as good as a drink, as they say."

Now the light was paling on the summit snows. Kitty heard her father's soft-footed, apologetic tread on the back porch and heard Mrs. Ewing brightly say, "Well, I must toddle along now and thanks a million for the treat. My turn next time."

The music student was at work on *The Well-Tempered Clavichord* and the phonograph was playing "The Object of My Affection" as fast as merry-go-round music. And down in the kitchen, as she clattered and banged her pots and pans, Mother Pollyana began to sing "The Stein Song."

For I Have Wept

Gerald Stein

"You can tell them by the eyes," she said. Her hands and her hair, full of curls put up the night before, were still trembling. "See that girl? She's been here for nineteen years, ever since she was twelve, and there's not a thing in the world wrong with her. But look at her eyes."

I looked at a skinny young woman who was walking by. Her eyes, narrow and glistening, reminded me of razor wounds.

"So full of hatred," sighed my wife, and lit another cigarette, her fourth of the hour.

I looked up through sycamore branches stirred by a late spring breeze to a cloudless sky. Rolls of sycamore bark came blowing down onto the grass where we sat and rolled themselves into replicas of something dogs had done. They littered the grass. Brick towers and wooden cupolas loomed at the end of every vista, and I tried to picture the architect who had thought it necessary to design these fortresses. Then for the third time that hour a woman with white hair and a blue institution blouse leaned against the bars of her window and shouted a five-minute malediction. A man, also dressed in institution garments, pattering in some purposeless fashion at the foot of the same building, looked up at her in troubled surprise. His expression changed as he realized that her tirade was directed to the nameless air.

"She sounds like my grandmother," I exclaimed. "She sounds the same, exactly." And I looked around with eyes more naked than ever at all the feverish women who, in an imitation of life, walked in groups of two and three down to the very end of the cement path that led to town,

then moved back again to some starting point I could not see.

"Eyes mean more than voices," said my wife, and I remembered her eyes two months ago, green, snapping, glaring out into a world that was, she insisted, shaped differently from anything she or I had ever imagined. Her eyes, once, had been as dreamy as my own. That, no doubt, was the trouble. We had been too dreamy—as if we were young enough to still live in a world of infinite possibility.

"Look over there," my wife said. "See that girl?" And she called out, "Louise! Oh, Louise! Come over for a minute." There was something warm and sisterly in her tone; I recognized it even as I muttered ungraciously, "Oh, don't have her come, for God's sake." I didn't want to meet any more of them. But my wife was smiling girlishly, and Louise—gray-haired, red-faced—was approaching with a grin of agonized shyness. My wife introduced her to me, and after shifting from foot to foot for a few uncomfortable moments, she was persuaded to join us on the grass. "Louise has been here for seven years," my wife informed me.

"Gee, is that a fact?" I asked, and Louise nodded in melancholy pride. "But you seem fine. What's keeping you here?" My question was needlessly clumsy. I had only the slightest idea of how to behave in such a place.

She stared at me for a moment. "Won't no one have me," she replied, without inflection of any kind. I recalled what my wife had told me—that many of the patients would be released if only someone, relative or friend, would assume their custody. She had mentioned this when we were in the visiting room, looking out across the hall where, on a Sunday such as this, other women from her ward were waiting, mostly in vain, for visitors. I looked at these others, their chests sunken, hair lank, clothes awry, their artless faces full of dismay, and I thought, not without a painful flicker of guilt—is it any wonder? For after all, these relatives and friends—who seldom visit and who do not assume custody—have their homes, their neighbors, their lawns, rosebushes, excursions in the family car. What place would these poor

women have in such a jocund company? Better that they remain where they are, folded in masonry, rustivating in this verdant Indiana countryside, miles from anywhere.

"Are you gonna go out?" Louise asked my wife. "Are you gettin' out of here?"

"Yes, I am, Louise," replied my wife, her smile apologetic. "Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" She looked down, doubtfully, at a single blade of grass on which a ladybug crawled, then up at each of us in turn. "How about takin' me along?"

She smiled as she spoke—faintly, but enough for me to chuckle in false heartiness at such a fine joke and say, "Sounds like a good idea."

"Yes, why not?" My wife, of course, really meant it.

Louise placed her hand on my wife's and said, "Aw, now, that's real sweet of you, honey, but you wouldn't want no old looney like me along on your honeymoon." She rose and said to me flatly, "She's a real sweet little woman, mister. I wish you luck and glad to have met you."

After she'd gone, I asked, "Do you think I offended her?"

"I don't know. I don't think so," my wife reassured me. "Sometimes it's hard to tell. She is a little odd." She looked off past the sycamores to where the male attendants were playing baseball. "Who wouldn't be odd, living in this place for seven years? You come here, thinking you can get some help, and all they really do is stuff you full of pills." Her eyes again were dark, like a bitter ocean, black and green.

"Oh, come on," I muttered. "Has it been that bad?" I watched with interest as one of the batters hit a long ball over the head of the left fielder, almost to the road. "It doesn't seem so totally bad. I mean, after all . . ."

She saw what I was watching and the corners of her mouth crinkled in angry derision. "You mean I could be having a good time playing baseball? Oh, why do you always have to be such a fool?"

Since I honestly didn't know, I couldn't truthfully answer. I recognized the question, however, as entirely legitimate, as one that I have often asked myself. . . .

The house. We had been happy renting, why had we

moved? Why had it seemed so necessary to own a house? And why that particular one? For that house is what I blame things on too.

We chose it for the huge willow tree that grew beside it, and for the pond in the park across the street, not to mention two overgrown pear trees in the backyard. But the same people who once assured us that we should be property owners now warned, "The willow roots will block your sewer, and in the summertime, with the pond, you'll get mosquitoes and humidity, which will cause mold and sticky drawers. The paint will peel." They announced all this in expert tones and added that from the branches of the willow trailing untrimmed on the roof, spiders and mites would infest our home. "It's pretty, though," they said. "But why has it gone so long unsold?"

A question we ourselves might well have asked. But we are, you see, from the metropolitan East, and the citizens of this Midwestern city, canny in an unvarnished way, had gotten the better of us.

In that house, on a summer evening after the children had been put to sleep, and we were lying half-dressed on our bed, I remember looking out at the long willow branches that hung shivering past the French windows that wouldn't quite close, and saying, "No, as long as you insist, no, I don't think I really love you, if that's the word you insist on using."

"Did you ever?"

"I don't know."

"Then we shouldn't have gotten married, should we?"

And I, the arbiter of wisdom, answered, "No, I don't suppose we should have, since this is the result."

"What is the result?"

"Boredom and unhappiness." I said these words, and in the dusk one of the pears dropped from a high branch and struck the ground, which meant that in the morning my son, grimacing and protesting, would have another soft, sweet, bee-laden piece of fruit to pick up and throw away. I will put some copper sulphate in the sewer, I thought, and finish screening the front porch; we must have someplace to sit and look out across the street to the pond.

"I didn't know you felt that way."

"What way?" Summertime, I recollected, was said to be the best time to get a good buy on storm windows.

"Bored and unhappy."

"Oh. Well, don't act surprised. Believe me," I said, the veteran of seven years of marriage, "it's not at all unusual."

My wife was sitting now on the edge of the bed, our third child at rest inside her, gazing sadly through the window at the willow branches. "No, I suppose not. I suppose a lot of people feel that way after a certain time."

"Everyone does. Everyone." I said this in the positive manner I assume when I don't want to be bothered. It was a tone that caused her to stop talking about love, and that was all I wanted. I wanted her to be quiet so that I could consider whether or not glass-fiber insulation—considering cost, ease of handling and installation, cleaning, and other factors—might be superior to rock wool. For I was deep in the throes of making our six-room bungalow into a property that would be the envy of every passing stranger; a property that would fetch, when it came time, two, three, even five thousand dollars more than the original price. This, I had been reliably informed, was the Romance of Real Estate, and I was crazy about it. When the time came, after painting the outside a fashionable slate gray and adding white shutters, I would place a neat little FOR SALE sign on the front lawn and pocket the profit. Nothing could have been simpler, except that, as it turned out, I am not a real-estate tycoon, nor was I meant to be. What I am, rather, is a failure, ferreting out now where I have gone astray.

Consider the circumstances in which we bought the house—inauspicious, to say the least. The agent, although he had a key, couldn't open the front door. He trotted around to the rear, but couldn't open that door either. So, with a boost from me he shinnied through the kitchen window. It was all, I can see now, much too undignified and precipitious. He was too eager, and so was I. "Come away," my wife said, and she was right. "We can see it another time."

"No, no." I was impatient. "We're here, let's see it."

The agent, struggling in his brown suit, his brogans in my palm, vanished headfirst through the window and a moment later flung open the kitchen door with the smile of a salesman who knows the value of an obligation.

"You have a solid location here, folks," he said. "That's something no one can take away from this house, and I want to stress that you'll love this little location."

Well, it was true, we did love his little location. It was our first house, and we were determined to give it everything. Still, we didn't have to be such pushovers. It wasn't fifteen minutes before he had our check for earnest money. There were, as it happened, many things wrong with the house: the plumbing, the heating, the wiring, the closet space, but all we could see were the French windows in the master bedroom, the willow tree, and that damned humidifying pond across the street (which was why the front door failed to open; it was swollen solidly against the jamb).

Oh, we bargained, of course. Don't think that we didn't bargain. He knew, though, that we were merely conforming to custom and were, in fact, convinced the house was a good buy for the money. We were such babies really. I can hardly blame him for treating our feeble attempts to lower the price with a manner just short of contemptuous.

Never mind. We went to see the owner, Mrs. Blauvelt, a widow who cultivated an air of please-help-me innocence but who, I found out later, was renowned in the real-estate circles of the city for a mind with the steely acquisitiveness of an animal trap. She owned many properties, but lived, with typical thriftiness, on the upper floor of a home whose lower half she rented to her sister's family. Mrs. Blauvelt had painted the walls of her apartment an attractive honey yellow and had furnished the living room with rather tasteful antiques. We were charmed. We talked about her house and our desire to buy it with all the graciousness we could muster.

"You'll love my little house," she said, a catch in her voice. "Me and my husband lived there for twenty-three years until he died."

"Oh, I'm sorry," my wife commiserated.

"That was five years ago," Mrs. Blauvelt said flatly. "What I used to like was looking out the kitchen window.

I could always look across the pond to where the bus was coming, and I would just have time to put down whatever I was doing while it made the turn-around, and I could catch it into town. Oh, it was a mighty handy little house. I can tell you that. I used to go to business, you know."

"No, I didn't know," said my wife, thrilled by such valor.

"Oh, my heavens, yes." Mrs. Blauvelt smiled bravely as we put our signatures on her personal six percent mortgage contract.

As soon as we moved in, I set to work improving things, not only for increased personal comfort but, as they say in real estate, for increased valuation. I added, for instance, a downstairs closet where there had been none. I made it myself, and it turned out quite handsomely, everyone said. And when my wife, home from the hospital with the baby, was forbidden by the doctor to climb stairs, I installed a water closet in the utility room ("half bath down"). It was hard work in the crawl-space below, drilling delicate safecracker's holes in the sewer main to make an accommodation for the flush pipe from above. There was a derelict plumber, who made the Salvation Army his home, to give me useless advice as he fortified himself with beer from the refrigerator, while I, down below, sweated like a prisoner tunneling from a jail. Now I think of that and all the other things I built, and it still causes me intense pain. The house is back in Mrs. Blauvelt's hands, all that work and our equity gone, and I shudder to think of it.

Our first day there I mowed the back lawn. I had borrowed a power mower, a loud, nasty little machine that kept stalling out on the thick stands of ragweed that had sprung up. As I leaned down to yank again on the starting cord, someone said, "I'm Mrs. Cheever." I looked up to discover, smiling, a vigorously iron-haired lady with as handsome a set of false teeth as I'd ever seen.

"Yes, I'm Mrs. Cheever," she repeated, "your neighbor next door."

I made a neighborly exclamation, and we shook hands over the fence.

"I just wanted to tell you," she began, "that I been

watching what you're doing here and that it sure needed doing for a long time. I don't know how many times I tried to get Mrs. Blauvelt to do something about this backyard, but she wouldn't ever have it cut."

"She wouldn't?"

"Not her. Tight with her money." Mrs. Cheever looked at me with sideways archness. "I guess she is. What did you pay, if you don't mind my asking?"

"For the house?"

"Not that it's any of my business, and you can just tell me to go ahead and not be so nosy, if you want to."

I told her what we'd paid, and there was a moment of shocked silence. "Well," she said, her voice grave, "it's a pretty little house. You got that nice old willow tree." She looked up into its branches and mused, "'Course, it'll have to come down before too very long, a tree that old."

Alarmed, I followed her gaze. "You really think so?"

"Oh my, yes," she said confidently. "After every storm the last two or three years I always look out my kitchen window to make sure it's still standing. I just hope it don't hurt anything when it goes, a tree that big. You got insurance?"

I said that I thought we had insurance.

"Better be sure about that if I was you. There's always something goes wrong with that house. The last people lived there, they had the sewer back up on them."

"When was that, Mrs. Cheever?"

"Why, just last winter it was. Remember that spell of freezing last January, how cold it got? Well, not that I keep tabs on what was going on here, because I got more than enough of my own business without meddling into other people's affairs. But I did happen to look out the window and see the truck parked outside, the howdoyo callit, the Roto something?"

I told her that I knew what she meant.

"Well, they were there, the plumber was there, and the furnace man too. I happen to know the furnace man real well, because he happened to work with my husband at the G.E. plant, and he was telling me what all was going on in that house."

She told me about the families that had lived in the

house over the past few years, either renting or buying on contract, as we were doing. All of them, it appeared, had been miserably unhappy, like the aluminum-storm-window-and-awning salesman from Lima, Ohio, who was fired from his job just before Christmas. He would disappear for days on end while his wife and four children, the fuel oil gone and no money for more, sealed off the rest of the house and barricaded themselves in the kitchen. They had returned last February to Lima, where her father, who had twenty-three years' seniority at the Chevrolet plant, could look after them. The house had been vacant since then.

My wife came out of the back door, and I introduced her to our neighbor. "I was just telling your husband about the bad luck the people ran into who lived here before," Mrs. Cheever said cheerily.

If I had known how, I would have changed the subject, for my wife believes omens are stronger than substantiated evidence. She is a college woman and has read and discussed many of the Great Books, but her real earnestness and zeal is reserved for astrology, palmistry and other gypsy arts that sidestep cold examination. While she always hopes for signs of good fortune, her spirit is commanded by those that augur ill. In short, my wife has always known for a fact that no good will come of anything, ever, and that was why I wanted Mrs. Cheever to shut her face. She didn't, though. She was the sort of woman who must have her say. She told us of the couple who had whipped their children until the police had to be called. The couple was sent to jail, and their children placed in the County Children's Home.

"They weren't what I'd want to call good people!" Mrs. Cheever exclaimed. "And I did my Christian duty!" She went on to tell us of the poor woman whose husband came home drunk night after night and beat her up, and how the woman, after he fell into an alcoholic stupor, would let him have it with whatever was handy—the potato grater, the steam-and-spray iron, anything. "He was always wearing some kind of a bandage," Mrs. Cheever said and chuckled, and I began to grow uneasy. It was hard to tell whom her sympathies were against.

She told us of the quiet couple who seemed to get

along just fine. They had twin girls, and he had a good job as a draftsman with a truck-trailer company. Then one day he loaded some suitcases into his car and drove away. Shortly afterward the local paper carried a notice that she had filed suit for divorce. It seemed to trouble Mrs. Cheever that she was not able to put her finger on just what it was that had made this couple break up. "She was a quiet woman," she mused, "and she just didn't act like she cared too much about making friends. They kind of stuck off to themselves, if you know what I mean." She looked at each of us rather sharply, to see if we *did* know what she meant, and we nodded uncomfortably. My wife, I could see, had become quite preoccupied with these dark tales, and I looked into Mrs. Cheever's cheerful beefeater face and silently wished her to blazes.

She invited us to see her house, and it turned out to be clean, carpeted and in much better condition than our own. It was much larger and more carefully built; it featured a completely modern kitchen—wall oven, plastic counters, birch cabinets—all of it obviously dear to her heart. My comment was, I'm afraid, a bit supercilious. "This is all very nice," I said, "but you must come over sometime and try my wife's cooking."

My wife smiled, but Mrs. Cheever, not a person to let anyone put anything, however small, over on her, answered, "Yes, we just had the whole new kitchen put in. Guess what I paid for the house, though."

I told her that I wasn't a good guesser and named deliberately a low figure. "No, sir," she replied, and named one still lower—lower, in fact, than what we had paid. "Bet you don't believe me," she said confidently.

"Why shouldn't we, Mrs. Cheever?" asked my wife, distressed that our neighbor should harbor such hard thoughts.

But Mrs. Cheever was evidently accustomed to disbelief, for in no time she had set before us, sealed in plastic a newspaper advertisement which offered the house for sale at a price not too much higher than the one she'd mentioned. "Oh, I jewed them down some, naturally, but the price was right in the first place. My sister-in-law knew the widow woman who owned it, and all she wanted was to get shut of it so she could go live with her

fighter out in San Diego. No, sir, the only way to get a bargain is to wait with your money for a good opportunity, then snap it up. That's how I do." She scrutinized me carefully, but if she was looking for skepticism, she didn't find it, because I could easily picture her snapping up bargains—and anything else that chanced her way. "No, sir," she continued, "you don't find me buying the prettiest little thing that strikes my eye. No offense."

Afterward, as we retreated in disorder to our own suddenly diminished estate, my wife said, "That woman is going to cause us trouble."

I sensed a swarm of omens hovering and replied lightly, trying to flick them from her fancy, "Oh, she's probably all right. She could probably steer you right on a lot of things if you give her half a chance."

Well, my wife did give her half a chance, and Mrs. Cheever did do her best to steer her right. They held frequent conversations over the fence, and she got my wife to participate in things she'd never shown much interest in before. They went to church bingo sessions together several times, and to cooking-ware and cosmetics sale parties at the homes of various neighbors.

Yes, and I remember the day Mrs. Cheever showed my wife how to make mystery cheese balls: a core of blue cheese in a sphere of Cheddar dusted with grated Parmesan, chilled and served either sliced or whole. Mystery cheese balls. This sort of thing, it seemed to me, was striking at the heart of the real Midwest, or, as it liked to call itself, the real America.

Ah, why kid around? She was a real troublemaker, that Mrs. Cheever, any way you sliced her cheese balls. She disliked our kids for running on her lawn and she had a way, when she came into our house, of carrying a slice of cake or a jar of tomato preserves, like a ticket of admission, and looking all about for cobwebs and dirty corners. My wife, after one of these visits, would tear around with broom and broom, her face set in anger, muttering, "I've never seen a house so impossible to keep clean!"

She was suffering through a sweltering July and August, the last months of her pregnancy, while I, black and hot from laying insulation in the attic, became increasingly impatient. We had decided—it was my understand-

ing—that two children would be enough, and here she was swollen with our third. I continued to bitch and groan about the doctor's bills and the inconvenience of all. And so, only a few days before she gave birth, we were lying on our bed, as I have said, looking out through the French windows at the strands of willow hanging pale in the moonlit darkness. It was the sort of night when it would have been easy to say something to her other than, "No, I do not love you," but that is what I did say.

In September I finished painting the house. Winter came, and its seasonal disasters: twice the sewer backed up and twice the furnace, inadequate anyway, failed completely. I put up cheap plastic storm windows on a day when it was too cold for my hands to hold the nails, and by February the plastic had shredded apart. On a night utterly without wind of any kind, a large limb fell from the willow tree. It fell with a shriek of rending wood, smashed a window in the baby's room and punched a hole in the roof.

We did not see so much of Mrs. Cheever then, for she liked to keep indoors in her own house where it was warm. Occasionally she would come over with a day-old box of doughnuts from the A&P. She never stayed long though, because of the draft that came sweeping under the kitchen door and around the legs of the table where Mrs. Cheever and my wife sat sipping coffee and dunking doughnuts. And still, always, after one of these visits, my wife would stay up until all hours vacuuming, scrubbing, cleaning.

I was working on the second shift at the factory and one night, as I had done a few times before, I stayed out late with some of the men I worked with, and played cards in a tavern. I came home at three o'clock in the morning, smelling of beer, to find my wife on her knees in the freezing kitchen, scrubbing out the oven, straining to reach the last crust and crevice of grime. (Mrs. Cheever had paid a visit that evening after supper.) We had a terrible quarrel, and I remember trying to sleep, being asleep, and then being poked awake again and again, and upbraided with curses. I finally hit her and was astor-

ished by my action. I couldn't believe it. Who was doing this?

Not long after this my wife began paying visits to our lawyer, and we separated, although not before we had reached, during the first warm March days, what I thought, and she agreed, was a new plateau of understanding. It seemed, somehow, that we had passed through the worst. No more fuel bills, we told each other, feeling childlike and unburdened. I departed for work one day. "Good-bye, Daddy! Good-bye, Daddy!" screamed the children as I pulled the car door shut. From the porch my wife waved to me, smiling, seeming to say that there was hope for us yet, even if only a little.

But when I came home that night promptly and unreluctantly, she showed me a court order granting a temporary separation. She had obtained it with the aid of our lawyer (now hers), the same lawyer who had drawn up the contract for the purchase of the house. I am vague on the details, but it stated that I must leave the house immediately. My own house, mind you. My own toil and sweat! She would permit me, my wife said, in a manner that was a classic of its kind, to get my clothes, but if I didn't leave, she would call the police.

"Try it," I dared her. "Go ahead and try, a thing like this, going behind my back."

She laughed. "Is that all you're worried about, that I didn't get your permission?"

"But I thought we were going to be different with each other!"

"That's what you thought. How can things be different after what you said?"

I laughed, to show her how completely ridiculous she was. "Can't you forget anything?" I asked. "Are you going to hold everything I said against me *forever*, like an elephant?"

She didn't answer.

"Why is everything so *serious* with you?"

"You can't tell a woman you don't love her, you fool! You can't say those things to a woman!" She went to the telephone and began to dial.

"Who are you calling?"

"The police."

"What are you doing to me?" I shouted. "I only mean it in a sense!"

"It was the truth." She continued to dial.

"There are all kinds of truth! Use your imagination! Truth has many aspects!" Never had my voice, to my own ears, seemed so powerless. I heard her say on the telephone, "Yes, I told him to leave and he refuses."

"Damn right I refuse!"

I walked into the kitchen and took an apple from the refrigerator. My apple. My refrigerator. How sordid and demeaning this all was, just like one of those family rows that the hillbillies who worked in the factory often got into. *Police were called last night to investigate a domestic quarrel at . . .* And right next door to Mrs. Cheever too! It wasn't an item she'd be likely to miss. I went back into the living room and took a cocky bite out of the apple.

"They're coming," said my wife. "You'd better be gone when they get here, or Mrs. Cheever will see them taking you out."

Was I expected to stand for this? "You've had it," I told her. "Now everything is over. There might have been a chance, but not any more. You've ruined it, kid, because I'll never be able to forget what you did to me tonight. Never."

I was in a fine, intensely bitter fettle, but there was an unmistakable elation in her eyes as she opened the front door. "They're here!" she announced, as if old friends had finally arrived.

The police, when they came in, were quite decent. They had the look of married men, and one of them, with what seemed the sadness of personal experience, told me that there was nothing either he or I could do, that I had to leave for the time being. So that was what I did. I left, and spent the night at the Y.M.C.A., telling myself that the whole ludicrous situation was merely someone's idea of a joke—though whose, I couldn't for my life have said.

What I couldn't fathom was that I'd entered another dimension: I had become one of a certain class of men who are recognized for what they are, and whatever they do is, I couldn't bear it, for it wasn't me, it was someone else. But she wanted a divorce, she told me the next day.

looking up at me with the same face, the same black hair, the same green eyes that had always bordered the kingdom of tenderness, and which were now, although I wouldn't believe it, permanently hostile. Why? What had I done? I asked her, and she told me readily, but I wouldn't accept what she thought of me. There had to be some other reason, for I was not guilty; no, I was not.

I agreed to a separation, but I longed, like Dreyfus, not for pardon but for reinstatement . . .

A year passed; I became a creature no longer decent, flopping and floundering toward the instant of my undoing. I would not give her money for a divorce, her lawyer mentioned a possible garnishee of my wages, and I quit my job and got another in another state. I sent money for household expenses, of course—gas, electricity, sewer and water, fuel oil, doctor and dentist, clothing, this, that, and the hundred other things so necessary to the happy life—and I paid, regularly, the installments on the house. But not for a divorce. From this line there would be no retreat.

Hopefully, I would come back every two or three weeks and knock on the door with presents for the children and for her.

Once, after the children were asleep, we made love and then sat half-dressed watching a late movie on television. She made coffee and cinnamon toast, and I thought that tenderness had again enveloped us. But no, she wouldn't let me stay the night—it wasn't right. And besides, she had been advised, her legal position would be compromised.

"Who will know if I stay this once?" I asked.

Maddeningly high-minded, she replied, "I would, and so would you," and as I snorted, she added, "and so would Mrs. Cheever."

There was, I saw, no answering her, so I got up, dressed, and got out—not without saying something nasty, for I considered myself humiliated. I looked at the walls I had painted, the cabinets I had hung, the closet I had built, and remembered when they and she and the children and I were all of a piece, and I felt a sorry creature indeed.

One Saturday evening, laden like a Greek with gifts and hurrying hopefully home, I was stopped for speeding in a small town a few miles west of the Ohio-Pennsylvania line. I insisted that I had not been going that fast.

"You were hitting seventy-five," said the man in uniform, his face red and flabby, his eyes flickering with righteous distaste at me and my car and my driver's license.

"No, I wasn't."

"Don't give me any lip, sonny. One more word out of you and I'll add a reckless driving on. You had a wheel over the center line." He lifted his pencil and stared at me.

"Do as you damn please," I told him, watching his face tighten in the red glare of the revolving dome light. "I wasn't speeding, and you know it."

"You could do with some cooling off, sonny," he said. "Just follow along behind me."

As he walked toward his car, I leaned out and shouted. "I have a wife and three children! You don't have to call me sonny!"

At the police station they took away my possessions and locked me in a cell. Four hours later I obtained the services of the only available bondsman, after he'd finished refereeing the local high-school basketball double-header. I had never been in jail before, and I was so glad to be released that I got over being enraged at the injustice of it all. The desk officer, who had been absorbed in a detective magazine throughout my incarceration, now handed me back my belt, my cigarettes, my money, the keys to my car. I hurried to a telephone booth and called my wife.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"Just outside of Dayton. Guess what happened to me."

"I don't know. I don't want to."

"In jail. I was in jail. What an experience!" I tried to say it like Cary Grant.

"I'm not surprised," she said. "Not at all."

"You're not?" I asked, miserably. "Why not?"

There was silence, then, "Listen, who do you think you're talking to? Who do you think you *are*?"

"Me? What are you talking about?"

"You call me up after the kids have been waiting all day for you to get here, what am I supposed to say to them?"

"Listen, I was in *jail*! How could I call?"

"I don't care. Why should I care?"

I didn't know why but it seemed to me that she should, and I said, "I just felt lousy about it, that's all. Who else would I call?"

I heard her sigh. "Find someone else," she said. "Leave me alone."

"Must you talk like that?"

Another sigh. "You don't know what you're doing to me."

"I guess I shouldn't have called."

"You don't know what you're doing to me," she said again, sounding as though she lay buried under a pile of bricks.

"Are you tired?" I asked. "You sound tired."

"Yes," she said, faintly, "I'm tired."

"I'll see you tomorrow," I said. I could hear her weeping.

"All right."

"Stop crying!" I shouted.

"All right," she said.

"Tomorrow! I'll be there tomorrow!"

"All right," she said. Stepping out of the booth, after we'd said good-bye, I felt like one of Miss Carson's palolo worms, waiting for the blink of the moon's old eye.

It was noon when I arrived, and there were no children to run out of the house and down the steps, demanding to see what I'd brought them. They're at the candy store, I thought, as I took my presents from the trunk of the car and watched Mrs. Cheever come down her porch steps and hurry toward me. What the hell did *she* want?

"Oh, it's terrible, terrible!" she cried. "She said you were coming back today, but how was anyone to know if she knew what she was saying?"

"What do you mean, Mrs. Cheever?" I asked, as coldly as I dared.

She peered into my face and perceived that I really

didn't know what she was talking about. "They're gone!" she cried, her eyes shuttering the exposure of her joy.

"Gone where?"

"Oh, if you only knew what was going on here last night! The police! The ambulance!"

Finally I gathered that in the early hours of the morning my wife had come pounding on Mrs. Cheever's door, demanding that Mrs. Cheever come see how she had cleaned the stove and the space behind the refrigerator. "She was just plain out of her head, poor thing," Mrs. Cheever said. "I told her to come in, and I gave her a cup of instant coffee. I'm telling you, that poor woman just sat there and called me every name she could think of, and when she was all done, she told me to call her lawyer and have him come and get her. And that's what I did."

"Where is she now?"

"Why, she's in the hospital. The ambulance came and took her."

"What about the children?"

"Oh, they're in the County Home. She said you were coming home today, but how was I to know if she didn't really have it all mixed up with something else? She even said something about you being in jail. I would've been glad to look after them if I'd of known you'd be home, but how was I to know that? And there's no telling how long she's going to be in the hospital, is there?"

"No, I guess not. You've been very helpful, Mrs. Cheever."

"Well, I believe in helping out when it's at all possible. After all, it's our duty to help our neighbors. Oh, she was clean out of her head, you wouldn't have even known it was her, the things she called me!"

"What was that, Mrs. Cheever?"

"What she called me, you mean? Well for one thing, she called me a perfectionist."

"She did?"

"Yes." She looked at me with a trace of doubt. "I figured she meant it to be an insult, wouldn't you say? What did she mean, exactly? Would you know?"

"I couldn't be sure, Mrs. Cheever."

"And she told me—how did she put it?—that I was

not really a very Christian person." She paused to let me appreciate the ludicrous inaccuracy of the charge.

"I'm sure she didn't mean that."

"Oh, if I'd of thought for a minute she *meant* any of it—after all the ways I tried to help her out and all! Oh, no, your wife is a very nice woman when she's in her own mind."

We paused for a moment to consider my wife.

"The kids are in the County Home, you say?"

"Yes, poor things, they didn't even know what was happening. It's terrible. Isn't it a terrible, terrible thing?"

"Yes, it is terrible," I answered, knowing she'd have settled for nothing less.

Now, at this institution, I looked away from the buildings, and at my wife. She seemed slimmer, better-looking, almost chic. I wondered if she would forget the few rotten words I had let drop in the room with the French windows. Not very likely, was my guess. But perhaps, I thought, she will realize one day that I am merely a clown, not meant to be taken seriously.

She asked me again about the children, now with my mother, and I repeated that they were fine, but that they missed her these last two months. Her eyes became sad. I suggested a cup of coffee. She loves coffee. We got up from the grass, my wife and I, and walked in the direction of the canteen.

Tomorrow, immediately after breakfast, she would be returning to the children and to me. Yes, we are trying it again, and why not? Will either of us, ever again, make a better bargain than the one we struck in our youth, when there was no one to tell us what to do? I have nothing to say about love, nor has she questioned me. If she did, I could say only that there is a force which, like the tide, drives us together onto the same beach. And though it's true I am a fool, don't laugh at me, for I have seen her drowning in currents deeper than any I could feel, currents deeper than ambition, more important than pain. And, finally, I have wept.

From a sycamore another piece of bark dropped onto the path before us. I suddenly became aware of the similarity between sycamores and plane trees. When, as a

boy, I first came to New York, they were the trees I found planted in that begrudged strip of dirt between the sidewalk and the street. Having no acquaintance with such trees, I assumed that it must surely be some metropolitan disease that caused them to mottle and shed the way they did. I asked the other kids on the block what was wrong with them, but they hadn't known. Now I know it's only the way they grow. It's the sort of thing you learn as you grow older.

There

Peter Taylor

"LET me tell you something about the Busbys," the old gentleman said to me. "The Busbys don't wash themselves—not adequately. And especially not as they grow older."

That was how he opened our last conversation. It was our last meeting aboard ship, and the last he and I will be likely to have in this world. He was the kind of shipboard acquaintance you make who never seems real afterward. You remember him more distinctly than you do someone you have met on a plane or a train, but it is only because you were with him for a longer time. Nowadays particularly, there seems something unreal about people you have known on a sea voyage. To me, at least, it is nearly always as though I have met some character out of the past or out of a novel. And I never know whether it seems stranger when they *do* or when they *don't* explain why they are traveling by ship instead of by plane. In any case, the odd thing was that this man was a shipboard acquaintance who had come originally from my own hometown, and it was of people back *there* he was speaking, not of our fellow passengers. We two had grown up in the same inland city, and we came more or less from the same stock there; yet the thirty or forty years that separated us made us strangers to one another as no distance across the surface of the earth nowadays, and no difference in nationality, could possibly have. . . . At least so it seemed to me at the time. And nothing could have amused me more than his assumption that I would be acquainted with the same families that had once so absorbed his interest.

"Those Busbys! Those Busbys!" said he, thumping on the smoking table between us with his long lean middle finger. "It all comes to one thing: such people have no imagination about themselves!" At first he resorted to the finger thumping and those exclamations to make sure he got my full attention. But finally, seeing me comfortably fixed in my chair, my academic pipe lighted, and my whole attention directed to his discourse, he spoke without bothering to look at me. "That's what made the Busbys a laughingstock. Lack of imagination about themselves. Of course the Busbys were not alone in this lack of theirs, but, despite all the good company they were in it was no less damaging to them. There was a Busby boy named David, for instance, about the age of two young lady cousins of mine. They used to visit us every summer when I was a small boy, and David Busby would try to court the younger girl. But she, being an out-of-town girl and not impressed by the Busby money, mocked him behind his back. Whenever he had been especially attentive to her, she and her sister had a little parody they would recite. It began, 'David, David, dirty but true . . . Moreover, when there was a series of parties, they used to count the times that David appeared wearing the same shirt with the same soiled spots on it. He would change his collar, so they said, for any little old chafing-dish party (his detachable collar, you know—the kind Americans never wear any more), but it took an affair of the first magnitude to bring him out in a clean shirt. . . . Poor fellow, I guess he never knew what a little fresh line might have done for him with the girls."

As the old gentleman spoke he gazed off across the public room, as though trying to see out of first or porthole and then another. He was a strikingly handsome old man, with a decidedly clean and well-scrubbed look and he had described himself to me as a retired career man from the diplomatic service, which I see no reason to doubt he was. I'd judge that he was well past seventy but his figure was very slender still and straight, and by day he was given to wearing a beige or a checked waistcoat under a close-fitted tweed jacket. Or sometimes he wore a double-breasted navy jacket with brass buttons. There was always a handkerchief in the breast pocket of

his jacket, and he owned at least one pair of brown suede shoes. Though his hair was white it was quite thick, and always perfectly groomed of course. His face was almost incredibly youthful looking. There were neat little wrinkles about his eyes and at the corners of his mouth, but otherwise his skin was as smooth and pink as a little child's. Somehow this had the effect of making me think a good deal about his age and about how he must have appeared when he was younger. I am confident that he had been a beautiful, towheaded child, that his hair became black in young manhood, that after forty his temples turned becomingly gray, and that finally his entire panache had gone snow white in his sixty-fifth year or thereabouts.

He impressed me from the beginning as someone with great personal reserve and reticence. And until that last day on shipboard he had never revealed to me anything about himself—not even inadvertently. But as people of genuine reserve very often are, he was voluble enough on other subjects—particularly on the subject of *other* people. . . . He had a way of making you feel that he couldn't say what he was saying to anyone but you. From the outset I observed in him what seemed a mixture of masculine frankness and almost feminine gossipiness. It was this mixture which must always have constituted his charm for people. Yet at that time I imagined he could only speak to me as he did because we came originally from the same place and because we had both asserted, right away, that we would never under any circumstances go back *there* to live. "Our hometown is a cultural desert, as I'm sure you'll agree," he had said to me when he learned that I was an academic. "Most people there haven't even the imagination to see how urgent it is that they get away from the place if they are going to stay alive."

Though he had not himself really lived at home since he went East to college in 1906, the old man's voice still retained a flavor that I recognized even before we had introduced ourselves. I had sat eavesdropping in the bar one night—the night of our second day out—and heard how his voice contrasted with those of the other passengers with whom he associated, an assortment of English-

men and Eastern seaboard types. That was really what made me distinguish him from the others in the first place. And soon after we began our nightly talks he and I discovered that he had known—ever so slightly—an uncle of mine who had died before I was born. And it turned out that I knew a girl—ever so slightly—who had married the son of one of his boyhood friends. That's how it went. At no point did we discover a mutual acquaintance. We missed completely when it came to individuals, but there was no mistaking the city that he and I had in mind or the kind of people there about whom Mr. Charles Varnell and I knew most.

During that last session of ours we were alone in the first-class smoking lounge. Though there was little likelihood of anyone's wishing to join us, Mr. Varnell had deliberately selected two chairs that were set well apart from all others. Our ship had docked that afternoon at Cherbourg and was resting in port while the Continental passengers were let off and others were received on board for the return voyage to New York. During the night ahead the ship would cross over to Southampton, and in the morning Mr. Varnell and I would say our brief good-byes before going down the gangplank. Actually I did catch another glimpse of him in customs, and I even spotted him again, at a considerable distance, after we had detrained at Waterloo Station an hour later. He and his wife were being greeted there by some old-fashioned rather toney-looking English friends. As a matter of fact I recalled his having told me, when with mere perfunctory politeness I suggested we might run into each other in London, that he and his wife were stopping with friends for only a few hours. They would be in London "almost no time at all." They had been "out to New York" for six weeks, and now they had to rush down to Surrey and put their house there in order before going up to Scotland for a month ("We're going up to Scotland to shoot"—or some such elegant and wonderfully dated remark). I never knew whether his wife was English or American or of some other nationality. As for her appearance, it is sufficient to say that she looked the way *his* wife should look. I was never introduced to her, not even that morning at the gangplank when he and I shook hands and

parted. Our leavetaking was so brief and casual that the other passengers, and perhaps even his own wife, may have supposed that neither of us was sure of when, during the voyage, he had talked to the other. But our real farewell had already taken place—in the dead stillness of the Port of Cherbourg. It was he who did the talking on that occasion, and I imagine that what he said to me then had had to wait until he knew that he and I would not talk again.

I laughed outright of course when he said the sort of thing he did about the Busbys' not washing themselves. I suppose he expected me to. But he didn't laugh. "It is no small matter," he insisted, "for people not to wash—regardless of how rich or well-to-do they are. It kept all the Busbys from ever amounting to anything outside their own little bailiwick. Let me tell you. I used to sit behind that same David Busby's grandfather in church—Mr. Lionel Busby. I was just a little fellow at the time, and what I chiefly remember about him are the deep creases and wrinkles in the back of his neck. I have never seen anything to equal it on a man of his position in the world—the visible dirt, that is to say, caked in those creases on the neck of that extremely rich old man. The Busbys were *very* wealthy at that time. I used to hear it debated at home whether Mr. Lionel was our second or third richest citizen. And he was no self-made man. If I am not mistaken, they had owned downtown real estate since before the Civil War. Mr. Lionel himself went East somewhere to college. But even up there they couldn't teach a Busby to wash his neck properly. And after college he came back, the way most of those people do, and married somebody at home—some girl who, I suppose, didn't care about or was willing to overlook the peculiar characteristics of the Busbys.

"Now, a man *can* be careless about his personal cleanliness. I understand that. A man *can* be somewhat slovenly in his dress. Some of my closest friends are so—to a certain degree. But what I found most revolting was its being the trait of a whole family, and a trait that the community regarded with a tolerance beyond all comprehension. Further, whereas it is possible for a gentleman to have such a weakness, it is not possible for a lady. And

yet there were two Busby maiden ladies of my mother's generation, aunts to said David Busby, daughters to Mr. Lionel; and *they* managed it, and *they*, by the community at large, were forgiven. They were a laughing stock, yes; but the point is that their defect *was* regarded as a laughing matter. I remember them as two old creatures with dyed black hair and reeking of perfume. Their fondness for personal finery, their tendency to be always overdressed, was proverbial. But the state and condition of their clothing was generally a scandal. My mother used to speak of a certain black lace mantilla that one of them wore. It slipped from the lady's shoulder one day when Mother was sitting beside her on our parlor settee, and when Mother helped her retrieve it she found the thing stiff with old spillage as though it had been freshly starched. Those two ladies were renowned also for the jewels they possessed and for the number they ornamented themselves with on all occasions. They were averse to telling the history and value of every brooch, bracelet, or pendant earring they had on. They spoke of their jewels always as their 'stones,' and some rustic out there once remarked that the Busby ladies ought to put fewer precious stones on their fingers and more putty and ice stone on their elbows.

"But the prize story about the two Busby ladies is a very old and familiar sort of story. It is that of the burglar and the two old maids. . . . The Misses Busby came from a party one evening and heard the intruder moving about upstairs. He was after some of their 'stones' of course, and of course they were wearing most of what was after. The two intrepid ladies didn't even call in their servants or the neighbors or send out for help of any kind. With an ice pick and an ax they hunted down their man, who, as it fortunately happened, was unarmed. . . . There were several versions to the story, all of them ending with the man stretched out—in a dead faint—on the floor of one of the upstairs bedrooms. One version, probably the correct one, had it that the fellow was such a coward that he passed out cold at the sight of the ice pick and the ax. And then there was a pornographic version, of course, which I shall spare you. And there was also a third version, in its way as indelicate as the second, being

version which found favor amongst people most intimately acquainted with the Busby family. It seems the man had hidden himself in an old-fashioned clothespress, and the condition of the garments stored therein was so strong that when the old maids found their man he was already overcome by the rank and musty emanations. They dragged him out into the room, but he did not recover consciousness until after the police had finally been summoned and had removed him from the scene of the crime. His own version of what happened will never be known. He maintained through his trial and ultimate conviction that he could remember nothing. He may only have been possuming, of course, but it is possible on the other hand that the fellow had suffered an awful shock—of one kind or another.”

Mr. Varnell told these anecdotes about the Busbys with never a smile and with but little discernible relish for the details he brought forth. He seemed to know the stories so well that it was not really necessary for him to think of what he was saying or how he would say it. One felt, even, that most of his phrases had been used in the exact context before. What made it interesting, though, was that one got the impression it had been such a long, long time before. There were moments when he seemed to listen to his own voice with a certain detachment and wonder. He was like a man delving into a trunk he had packed away years ago and who did not know himself, what he would come upon next. His transition from the Busbys to the Jenkinses was quite abrupt and at the same time seemed very natural and easy, too. It was as though he had put down one old photograph or letter and picked up another. “The astonishing thing to me was always that the Busbys, like the Jenkinses and other families with equally marked peculiarities, remained in the very cream of society *there*. Nobody there minded them as they were, and so why need they change themselves? *Anything* was forgivable. If you ever met a Jenkins for instance—as I am sure you have—you simply expected to meet a fat man, or, worse, a fat woman. It was entirely because the Jenkinses wouldn’t stop eating. Jenkins apologists liked to put out that their trouble was glandular, just as the Busbys were all supposed to be

nearsighted, or farsighted, or whichever it is that would excuse their not knowing that the backs of their necks were dirty. But once I saw Alice Jenkins eat eight pieces of fried chicken, three servings of potato salad, and a whole half of a watermelon in one sitting. It was on a picnic at Riverview Mills. Alice, you see, was the only Jenkins of my generation, but she was a-plenty. That day at Riverview Mills we all went out on the pond in rowing boats. The couples paired off, sitting side by side in the boats—in general they did. But there was never any pairing off on Alice's part. Without any companion she occupied the entire poop seat in her boat. There was a great deal of merriment over the fact, and she joined right in with it. But there was something repulsive to me about the way the boat sank down under her weight; and somehow it was worse because the image of all the other Jenkinses, all her fat relations, rose up in my mind.

"A couple of years later Alice was a debutante, and during the summer before her coming out she starved herself until she got to be quite decent looking. In fact she appeared that fall looking a very handsome woman and with quite elegant manners. She got engaged soon after Christmas, however, and by the time she married in May she was a full-size Jenkins again. In the years just after that I used to see her when I would be back home on a visit. It would be at the Sunday night buffet supper at the country club; and not many years passed before she was surrounded there by a tribe of little Jenkins elephants (I forget now what her married name was). They occupied a long table that the Jenkinses had been occupying every Sunday night for years, and Alice's parents would still be there with them, as well as some of her enormous cousins and uncles and aunts. How they heaped up the food on their plates! I can see them now trooping back to the buffet for second and third helpings. The food at the country club was the best in town those days, and the Sunday night buffet supper was surely the best bargain ever offered anywhere. Probably it was only this combination that could bring the Jenkinses out in full force, because they were great homebodies really, and the men in the family as well as the women were said to be splendid cooks. On his first trip to the buffet Alice

father used to take a tiny serving of every dish, even a pinch of each relish and a few drops of every sauce. Back at his table you would see him tasting away very thoughtfully. He had a high, rounded-out stomach, wonderfully symmetrical (like a giant tureen), and almost no chest. He wore a little gray, two-pronged imperial that stuck down like a meat fork over the white napkin which was tucked under his collar. While eating, he eyed his food intently, though, if some passerby happened to catch his eye, he would throw back his head and laugh aloud at himself and wave one corner of the napkin at the spectator. On his second trip to the buffet he narrowed his choice to four or five of the principal dishes. He became even more selective on his third trip. And the highest compliment he could pay the club chef was to go back for a fourth serving of some single dish.

"After supper, on a hot summer evening, the whole herd of elephantine Jenkinses would repair to the capacious wicker chairs out on the terrace beside the golf course. A special chair was reserved there for old Mrs. Jenkins, who outweighed her husband by at least 50 pounds and whose wide posterior could not be accommodated between the arms of any ordinary chair. Once they were all seated out there, they didn't rise until it was time to leave. Friends passing along the terrace, or seated in other groups nearby, would call out to them, asking how they had enjoyed their supper. They would reply in an enthusiastic chorus: 'Marvelously! Enormously!' Frequently, when it was time to go home, or if a little shower had come up, it would be discovered that Mrs. Jenkins had fallen into a deep sleep in her chair. There would be a great stir and commotion with even the grandchildren joining in the effort to wake the sleeper and prize her out of her chair. All over the club grounds people would hear them and would smile at each other and say, 'It's only the Jenkinses trying to wake Miss Nanny.'

"Not a very edifying picture, is it?" said Mr. Varnell, looking altogether serious, and disregarding my audible signs of amusement. "And let me tell you," he continued, "the Busbys and the Jenkinses were not very exceptional people in our hometown. It used to seem to me that every family there had some awful deficiency—I might almost

say affliction—that marked them as a family. It was so, of course. Or it was nearly always only something they might have overcome if they hadn't been so satisfied and so mutually indulgent. You and I know what it was they needed to do, of course. But why was it that people with so much money and so much leisure could not understand what their next step ought to be? More of them than not they were people of genuine capability. The men were actually men of imagination when it came to business and money matters. The women, though you could not say they were cultivated, were not without charm and manners of a kind. But they stuck themselves off from the world and lived their sort of tribal life. Of course some of them would pick up and leave for a while. Even the Liddell Busbys did, I think. But they couldn't stick it out long enough. They always came back saying that 'people in Europe' or 'people up East' were condescending to them. Naturally! What else can you do but condescend to people until they have learned to wash themselves and to eat with moderation. Some of them even enlarged their horizons by taking their capital with them and investing it in bigger things than we had there. But still they came back at last, singing that false old tune that there's no place like home.

"Even when I was an adolescent I used to wonder how I could ever really fall in love with any girl who came from one of those families. And I never developed a genuine romantic interest in one of them till after I went to college. She was a Morris—Laura Nell Morris. I won't bore you by telling you what a beautiful creature Laura Nell was. Suffice it to say that it was love at first sight for me. And suffice it to say, on another score, that she bore only the very slightest family resemblance to her brothers and sisters and to her parents. She was a silly, hard-boiled, scarum kind of girl. I won't pretend otherwise. She had *no* conversation, and yet at a party she would never stop talking. She recited limericks, and riddles, and shaggy dog stories, and she remembered and would make us listen to every poor joke she had ever heard at vaudeville and minstrel shows. Further, she was the sort of person who prided herself on always taking a dare, no matter how foolish it was. You couldn't afford to speak the word

her presence. It is a wonder she never got into serious trouble, whereas actually the most punishment I think she ever took was one night when somebody dared her to keep silent for fifteen minutes. She succeeded all right. But I was her escort on that occasion and afterward when I was taking her home I saw Laura Nell Morris, for the only time ever, in what I would call low spirits.

"There is even worse to be said about Laura Nell, however, and I might as well get the worst over with. She had a passion for playing elaborate practical jokes, not on her friends and contemporaries but on members of her own family—particularly on the older members. The odium of this was somewhat mitigated, perhaps, by the happy fact that the family did not mind her jokes so much as they might have done. They thought it childish of her, and they were baffled by her willingness to take such pains as she did in the preparation of her jokes. But it was their view that if Laura Nell derived real satisfaction and amusement from the practice, then they must not absolutely forbid her continuing and must not resent being, themselves, her objects. That was what the Morrisses were like. If such extreme tolerance and disinterested regard for one another made them seem ridiculous, it was at the same time a most appealing quality for a family to have. And among its consequences, I am perfectly convinced, was the measure of individuality which all its members developed.

"I have already said how little the Morrisses looked alike. There was a redheaded grandfather whose coloring did turn up in two of the older children. And Laura Nell, who was the youngest of the five, had just a suggestion of red in her dark hair. Perhaps there was something about the eyes of all the children to remind you of the father, if you noticed carefully. And there was a gentleness of speech general amongst them—even in the case of Laura Nell—that made you know they had been brought up by the same mother. But surely they had nothing more in common. There was a very tall brother, a short brother, and one of medium height. The middle-sized one was athletic, the tall one bookish, and the short one socially inclined. Laura Nell's only sister was the eldest child, and she was known for her quiet and responsive disposition,

for her way of drawing out other people in conversation so that they would appear to best advantage.

"Part of Laura Nell's attraction for me—need I say even?—was the very absence of any strong family marking. At our first meeting I didn't realize that she was all related to the other Morrisises. She was three years younger than I, and she had grown into a young lady since I went away to school. I was convinced that I had never laid eyes on her or on any of her family before. It turned out that I had in fact been acquainted with two of her brothers but had always supposed that they were, at most, distant cousins to each other. I found the very idea of such a family intriguing, and I find it so even to this day. Their mere unlikeness to one another, alone, would not of course have accounted for the impression they gave. It was their dissimilarity plus, in every case, without exception, a very strong and attractive personality. It was inconceivable to me that such a family should be content generation after generation, to waste themselves on a town like ours. Mr. Morris was a lawyer with a national reputation in his profession. A good proportion of his clients were in New York and Philadelphia, not to mention Chicago and other cities nearer by. It would have been a very natural thing for him to have moved his family to New York. With such connections as he had with Mrs. Morris' considerable fortune, and with all the natural social graces and intellectual capabilities, what interesting lives they might have had, what *serious* careers they might have made for themselves, if only they had got away from there. For the Morrisises there would have been no handicaps, no bars of any kind.

"Once when I was talking to Mr. Morris about Laura Nell I made a point of telling him what an interesting and admirable family I thought they were. I even went into some detail as to why I found them so. 'Well,' he said to me, 'you *are* in love with my daughter if you think so, and we are as different from the rest of the world as that. In fact, you have about the worst case I've ever encountered. Laura Nell is a fortunate young lady. I wish you success with her. Sincerely I do.' But he treated the matter casually and even lightly. He made no objection to my suit. But he did not offer to speak in my favor

Laura Nell. If he had, the matter might have come out differently. I am not sure, though. At any rate, it couldn't have come out worse.

"Laura Nell's mother did not take such a disinterested view of my suit. She was a most amiable and sympathetic woman, and she told me that she could not imagine a more satisfactory son-in-law than I was certain to make. Still, she would not try to influence Laura Nell. In our conversations she spoke of Laura Nell almost as if she were someone else's daughter and spoke as if I were a son whom she was comforting and encouraging. There was always *some* of that in Mr. Morris' tone, too. If my own parents had lived until I was a grown man, I think they might have talked to me as Mr. and Mrs. Morris did. I like to think so. But I had no very near relative of any kind after I was in my teens, and the elderly banker and old bachelor who was my guardian and who had controlled my trust fund till I came of age was not anybody to turn to. My real confidants were Mr. and Mrs. Morris.

"Soon after Laura Nell refused me the first time, I came to call one day when she wasn't at home. It was during the last week of September, and Mrs. Morris took me down to the end of the garden to show me her chrysanthemums. The late summer and fall flowers were a specialty with her, and she was certain that there was going to be a killing frost that night. There were splendid arrays of asters and dahlias on either side of the garden walk, but we had to go to the very end of the garden and climb to the top of a little terrace there in order to look back toward the house and have a proper view of the chrysanthemums. It was a chilly late-afternoon, with the air bright and dry. I stood beside Mrs. Morris on the brick terrace and was able for a moment to admire the beds of russet and gold just below where we were standing. But it was only for a moment. At the other end of the garden I saw the great neo-Georgian house with its Palladian windows upstairs and its wide porch below. The muscular wisteria vines on the trellis of the porch were already leafless at that season. Suddenly I said to Mrs. Morris, 'Laura Nell has refused me. . . . I am convinced now that there is no hope for my cause.'

"I was not really convinced of it—sad to relate. The

passing of nearly two years and a considerably more drastic gesture on Laura Nell's part would be required for that. But Mrs. Morris herself was, there can be little doubt, convinced even then. She did not tell me to give Laura Nell time, or anything of that kind. When I withdrew my gaze from the house and looked at her, there was the sweetest, gentlest look in her gray eyes that I believe I have ever beheld in human eyes. And when she spoke it was not encouragement but consolation she offered me.

"The consolation came in a strange form. Laura Nell's practical jokes on her family were something that the family kept very much to themselves. I mean to say, they often referred to the fact that she had such a weakness, and on some occasions they were cautious in their behavior for fear of being led into one of her traps. But they would never oblige you with an account of any particular joke. If pressed, they would only laugh and say, 'It's much too grim. For Laura Nell's own sake it can't be told.' And since Laura Nell would not discuss the subject herself, I had never had any clue to what her jokes were like until that afternoon when I was out there at the end of the garden with Mrs. Morris. What she revealed to me is all I know to this day of Laura Nell's jokes.

" 'My dear,' she began, 'I can't blame you for being so in love with Laura Nell. She's an enchanting little person. But I want to tell you about two pranks that a certain young lady played on members of her own family. It may amuse you, and you may want to reflect on what caprices such a girl might some day treat her lawful husband to.' With no more preface than that and with no further explanation of her reason for doing so, she then told me about a joke that the certain young lady had once played on her father and about another she had played on her maternal grandmother only a year before the old lady died. . . . It seems that the grandmother had a great fondness for attending funerals, and especially the funerals of indigent relations and friends and even slight acquaintances who were not so well-to-do as herself. The measure of her sympathy for the bereaved and the strength of her determination to be present at the funeral depended in each case on how straitened the family's

circumstances were. Well, the old lady's granddaughter did a terrible thing. She arranged that she herself should accompany her grandmother to one of these funerals, and then when the hour came she got them into the wrong funeral. And she did it on purpose, as a joke. The poor acquaintance who was dead was one that the old lady had not seen in many years and that she probably would not have recognized had she met her on the street. Whereas the funeral they attended was that of a wealthy neighbor whom she had been seeing with some regularity in recent years but whose death did not seem to touch her at all.

"Since the grandmother's hearing and sight were not what they had once been, she managed to sit through the funeral service without discovering the trick that was being played on her. It was only at the end when they had gone up to view the remains and she had looked down into the face of her dead neighbor that she understood whose funeral it was. The shock was such that she had to lean on her granddaughter's arm all the way to the carriage, but by the time the driver, whom she reprimanded for having taken them to the Presbyterian instead of to the Methodist Church—by the time the driver had helped them inside the carriage and closed the door she had realized that the 'mistake' was all her granddaughter's doing. The girl didn't deny her guilt for a moment, and she only restrained her merriment until they had got out of the sight and hearing of the mourners. 'It's only what you deserve, Grandma,' she said to the old lady, who sat staring at her incredulously, 'for being so unsympathetic to your own kind.'

"The practical joke that the girl played on her father was not so bad as that, but it had a similar theme. The father prided himself on the tradition that his ancestors back in Virginia, 100 years before, had been ruined by the 'cult of hospitality.' In fact, he kept in touch with a host of distant kin in Virginia; furthermore, new and seemingly ever more distant members of the connection were continually being made known to him. It was not uncommon for them to come and put up at his house overnight when they were (ostensibly) passing through town on their way to the West Coast or to the Deep

South; and they did not scruple to write to him from time to time for small loans or free legal advice. He spoke of them censoriously as 'broken down aristocrats,' but still he was proud of them as living proof of the old family tradition. . . . A telephone call came on a Saturday night, purportedly from a relative that had never been heard from before. The male voice said that the speaker was 'having certain difficulties with the law' and that he, along with his wife and their seven children, were stranded 'temporarily' at a downtown rooming house without the means of buying their Sunday dinner next day. The desired invitation to dinner was obtained, of course, and at 1:00 o'clock the next day the host and his family had assembled in the front drawing room to welcome their troubled cousins. Instead of their cousins, however, there arrived at precisely 1:00 o'clock another family quite well known to all present. It was a Mr. and Mrs. Herman Miller, their two married sons, their daughters-in-law, and their grandchildren. Mr. Miller's investment and brokerage company had recently collapsed, he had been indicted by the grand jury, and it was generally conceded that in the end he would not avoid a jail sentence. The Millers' home had already been foreclosed on, and they were preparing to move from it the following Monday morning. For a number of years they had been living in very fine style, and by their host that Sunday noon they had always been regarded as parvenues and fourflushers. They were received for dinner that day, however, in a most cordial and hospitable manner by a family who grasped at once whose work the whole business had been.

"I can only account for Laura Nell's practical jokes and for her overbearing, chatterbox ways by attributing it all to an excess of vitality. She had a store of energy that she didn't know what to do with. She ought to have found some sensible use to put it to, but somehow she couldn't. She remained a silly, harum-scarum girl when she ought to have been maturing into the wonderful young woman that she might have been. And yet her very vitality and animation were what attracted me first. I fell in love with her on first sight almost, and when I discovered that, though she would listen to no one else, she *would* listen to me, it seemed to me that I had only then begun to live

and I was sure for the first time that I was going to be able to make something of my life.

"I suppose she was in love with me, at first. During the first weeks and months of our acquaintance she gave every sign of being so—every sign that a young lady of that day could give. And during that period I had but one object in life. It was finding moments when I could be alone with her. Laura Nell seemed as eager as I for those moments, and by the time we had known each other a year we had discoursed upon every subject that a young lady and a young gentleman of that day were permitted to discourse upon. I was no longer living there at home even then. I had begun training for my career immediately after college (I was one of the first to have any formal training in the field). But I took every opportunity to go back home and see Laura Nell. I was confident that she would someday be my wife, and I could already imagine her as a brilliant hostess and as the heroine of a thousand drawing rooms from St. Petersburg to Buenos Aires. I was sure of how swiftly she would be transformed into a really serious person once I got her away from *there*.

"From the very earliest days of my courting Laura Nell I found myself talking to her about the other families that moved in our own circle—that is, about the other people whom we both had more or less grown up with. At the beginning she was greatly amused by all I had to say about those people. I can hear her pretty laughter now and hear her urging me to continue and say more. 'What else?' she would say. 'What else? Go on.' The truth is, I wonder now if she understood that all my criticism of others implied a favorable comparison of them to herself, and wonder if she realized that while I was giving my true opinion of those people and the life they lived and while I had a genuine interest in the whole subject, I was also using it to pay her the most direct compliment that good taste and the proprieties of that age permitted—permitted at that stage of our courtship. Perhaps she did understand, but, as time passed, my talk itself—particularly my talk about the peculiar traits those families had—became even more interesting to her and ceased altogether to be a matter of amusement. And finally she came to reject all my complaints and strictures against those people, who

were so unlike herself and her own family, and she even became their staunch defender and apologist. It is hard for me to remember accurately how long a time was required for this transition. Sometimes it seems to me that the entire course of our friendship lasted but one brief summer. Other times it seems to me that it must have consumed half my youth. I know in fact, of course, that it was a period of three years—three years when I was making the final break back there and committing myself once and for all to another life.

“It was not until the second summer after I had met Laura Nell that I felt myself in a position to speak of marriage. By then I felt I could give her some concrete image of the life I was offering her. But by then Laura Nell was no longer in love with me. I can say that now, though I could not have said it at the time. I believed there to be certain difficulties in her mind about the life that I proposed for us, certain imaginary obstacles to our happiness, but I thought that with time she—or I—would overcome such doubts as she had. It was not, you see, as though she were any less fond of my company than she had been formerly or any less interested in the career I was bent upon or in my ideas about the place and the people that she and I knew best. No, despite the serious way she had listened to all I had ever said to her, she was very much the same silly girl that I had met a year and a half before. I was not in the least surprised that she burst out laughing when I made my formal proposal or even that she should treat it as a joke and tease me about it before her parents and other members of her family. ‘He’s too serious for me, much too critical,’ she would say when we were all assembled in the drawing room before dinner on a Sunday (I would be visiting back home, taking most of my meals at their house). ‘You should hear the way he analyzes other people. Within a month he’d know what I’m really like, and then there would be the devil to pay.’

“ ‘What she’s saying,’ her oldest brother said on one occasion, ‘is that you’re too good for her. I’d take heart from that. There couldn’t be a better omen.’

“But the trouble was, Laura Nell said the same things to me in private. And she said, in effect, that she was too

simple and artless a person to be taken out into the great world that I wanted to live in. She would be nothing but an embarrassment to a man who was as 'serious' and 'critical' as I was. At last I began to feel that it truly was all those things I said about such people as the Jenkinsons and the Busbys that disquieted her so. I came to realize that no one was readier than Laura Nell to overlook those people's limitations and forgive their failure to find a way out of that little pond in which they were such big fish. She was prepared to forgive them *everything*. When I ridiculed those who went away only to come back with their tails between their legs, she said she couldn't blame them for wanting to live amongst friends. When I talked about what wonderful experiences might be in store for her family if they got away from there, she replied that it would be the same with them as with 'everybody like us.' To me it was amazing to hear her equating herself and her remarkable family with those other, unattractive, unimaginative, provincial people. But that was what she did. 'I know how it would be,' she said. 'We'd do very well for a while, like the others. Then the truth would dawn on us suddenly.'

" 'What truth?' I asked. 'What is it that would dawn on you? I don't think you really know, yourself, what you mean.'

"She laughed at me, as if to say I was much too stupid. 'Why, it's easy: Dawn on us that we'd gone too far from home and that we'd better get back before it was too late.'

"It is hard to remember, after so many years, precisely the things she said. I do remember certain things, though. Once when I went home for a few days in February I had the happiness, for some moments, of believing that she might be coming round. We had attended a large reception together which turned out to be an announcement party for two of our friends. When we returned from the party to her house we went, for some reason, into a little card room that opened off the drawing room. We sat down in two little gilded chairs, facing each other across the card table's polished surface of inlaid woods. She was still wearing her furs, her gloves, and even her hat and veil. The hat was of brown velvet with a very high crown

and little, cream-colored bows pinned all over it. It was the most becoming hat I ever saw her wear; somehow made you want to reach out your hand and take hold of her tiny pointed chin, or even lift the veil and kiss the tight little mouth. When she first spoke, it even crossed my mind that in another moment I might be holding her in my arms. 'Would it make you miserable,' she began, 'to think you were going to end your days here where you grew up?' Through her veil I could not quite make out the expression in her eyes. I imagined that she was giving me an opening, that in my absence she had missed me—that she was now willing to debate with me how and where we might make a life together. I imagined that this was our critical hour and that I must be firm.

" 'I am only made miserable,' I said, 'by the thought that you may end *your* life herein a kind of misery you can't foresee.'

"But as usual, she laughed at me. 'I was not thinking about *us*,' she said. 'I was thinking about *them*'—the engaged couple, she meant, whom we had seen that afternoon. 'You know very well there is no chance for us. And please don't be so silly as to worry about me. Don't ever, ever worry about me. I was not made for misery of any kind.' . . . It is the sentence she wound up with that I remember most distinctly, of course: 'I was not made for misery of any kind.' As she spoke those words, her voice carried an impossible mixture of utter frivolity and total despair. And her eyes seemed to shine through her face-veil with a luminosity that could not be explained and that cannot be described—a light both bright and dim, warm and cold, both shimmering and glassy.

"That was in February, and I went out to see Laura Nell again in April of that year. She never seemed more radiant to me than she did that spring. But the real reason for my visit was that during that month of March she had ceased to answer my letters and—in addition—I had learned from a mutual friend that Laura Nell Morris had made a March trip to New York to buy her spring and summer wardrobe—had done so, you understand, without letting me know she was in that part of the country. Her Easter outfit was a coatsuit of cerulian blue! I went to church with her and her family on Easter morning, and

as I sat beside her in the family pew—and knelt beside her and rose with her to sing the old hymns—I think I was conscious in a way I had never been before of the glory of Laura Nell's physical beauty, frankly conscious, that is to say, of the wonderfully womanly figure beneath the snug-fitting coatsuit. When the congregation sang the hymns and spoke the words of the psalm, it was only Laura Nell's voice that I heard, and when I heard her I felt sure there had never been one of God's creatures more thoroughly alive or so full of the joy of being so. . . . On her head she wore a hat made entirely of feathers dyed the same shade as that of her suit. What a perfect hat it was for her—designed to complement the smooth texture of her skin as well as the reddish tints in her hair. Her eyes, which often seemed a gray-green, were pure blue that morning. Now and then during the service she turned to me and smiled. Each time she did so, I had the illusion immediately afterward that she had actually spoken to me and said what she could not possibly have said there.

“But I had come home that time with a suspicion, and now that I had seen her I believed that my suspicion was bound to be confirmed. Even on my February visit I had observed that she was more attentive to her dress and to her appearance in general than she had ever been in the past. The brown velvet hat with cream-colored bows was not something she would have worn a year earlier. And since then there had been her trip to New York, and now the evidence of the satisfaction and pleasure she had taken in her shopping presented itself each time she appeared. There was a question in my mind that I could not go away without asking. I wanted to know who my rival was.

“On Easter afternoon we went for a drive in her father's trap. The little vehicle was spanking new, and drawn by a pretty bay mare that stepped along smartly. I drove the mare of course, and as we rode along Laura Nell took to counting the automobiles—the machines, we called them—that were on the streets. She counted seven, and I suspect that represented the total number owned in the city at that time. It was a warm day for mid-April, but the sky was gray and overcast, and when finally we

turned and headed for home I commented on what a dreary sky it was. 'I don't think it's dreary at all,' Laura Nell said. "It is a lovely shade of gray." When I looked at her with a skeptical smile, she said, 'Is there any real reason why a gray sky cannot be thought as beautiful as a blue one?'

"It seemed to me that she was *trying* to make a quarrel between us. Suddenly I asked: 'Why have you stopped answering my letters?'

"She looked straight ahead and gave a little shrug. 'Letters are no good any more,' she said. 'I'll always be glad to see you when you come, but let's give up letters.'

" 'Is there someone else, Laura Nell?' I asked.

"She didn't answer until we had driven half a block. I watched her face, and what I felt most was pity. I could see it was going to be so hard for her to tell me. It *was* hard for her, and I can't ever forget how she said it. 'No, there is no one,' she said. It was as though she wished with all her heart and soul that that had not been the answer she had to give me. After a moment she laughed, and actually slipped her arm through mine. A futile gesture and a meaningless laugh. There was no concealing the emptiness in her heart. There was nothing more I could say. I didn't see her again until she was taken ill in the summer of 1911, more than a year later. . . . But I must tell you about something she had said to me long before that Easter. It was after she had already listened to me many a time on the subject of people like the Jenkinses and the Busbys. She had at first, you remember, found it very amusing to hear me describe how their family traits got on my nerves and how it annoyed me that they took refuge in a place that seemed willing to forgive them everything. Then, after a period during which she found it merely interesting or curious, she came to reject my criticism and showed that in her mind she associated herself and her own family with those people! It was while so disposed that she once said to me: 'Since you are so critical of everyone else, and so intolerant, I wonder that you're willing to forgive the terrible trait all we Morrisises have in common.'

" 'There is no such trait,' I said. We were alone in the family parlor in the back of the house, and we were

seated together in one of those wicker conversation chairs that are considered antiques nowadays but which were then merely hopelessly out of fashion and mid-Victorian and so, quite naturally, relegated to the back parlor. 'There is no such trait in this family,' I said, letting my eyes skip about the parlor walls from one gilt-framed studio-portrait to another.

"She tossed her head and laughed, and then looking me squarely in the eye she said, 'Ours is worse than obesity or dirtiness. My redheaded grandfather used to point it out whenever someone said how unlike we all were, or whenever we bragged on ourselves in any way.'

" 'Some of you have his red in your hair . . . '

" 'Oh, it's nothing like that,' she said. 'It is an unpardonable trait.' She went on at great length, saying she supposed it was what kept them from ever wanting to leave home and that it made her feel very close to the very people that I was so 'unsympathetic' with. 'I tell you what!' she said at last, bringing her hand down on the wicker arm between us. 'I'll make a bargain with you. If ever you can guess what it is without asking anybody—without getting any hints even—then I'll forgive you everything. Do you understand what I mean?'

"I thought I understood what she meant, but I told her that I wanted no such bargain. If she could not accept me because she loved me, then I wouldn't try to win her in a bargaining. I put it down as more of her silliness—as another of her jokes, and whenever she brought it up again I changed the subject.

"After she was taken sick I used to go out to see her every three or four weeks—as often as I could get away from my work. They took her all about the country to different kinds of specialists, just trying to get a diagnosis, if nothing more. I have come to suppose that it must have been some kind of cancer that she had, but in those days one didn't so much as breathe the word. . . . When I would see her between her journeyings about the country to visit doctors, she enjoyed pointing out to me that doctors were quite as ignorant in other places as they were *there*. During the year that we did not see each other, Laura Nell had written to me occasionally, and I had

always answered her letters, but in our letters and when I saw her afterward during her illness we wrote and spoke as old friends reminiscing about old, old times that had little relation to our present and future. Her mother overhearing us once, took me aside and said that it broke her heart to hear Laura Nell talking that way—as though her youth, and even her life itself, were something in the past. I expressed my regret at having led her into that kind of conversation, but Mrs. Morris quickly reassured me, saying that it was not just with me that Laura Nell talked so. She confided in me that the doctors everywhere were as disturbed by her indifference to finding the cause and cure of her suffering as they were by her physical symptoms. Now, I am not going to tell you that Laura Nell Morris died because she lacked a will to live. I have no doubt that had she lived today the nature of her illness might have been better understood and that some means might have been found at least to retard the work of her disease. I am convinced that today we should not have had to watch her strength ebb away month after month without respite or restitution even for the briefest period. And, even as it was, the poor girl took a certain joy from the life that went on around her till the end. Her indifference was not to life but to illness. In fact, as illness drew those she loved closer about her she seemed almost to relish the condition. And, silly girl that she was, she would not think of what the final consequence might be. Or would not think of it in a serious way. If the worst should come, she told her mother, she could not imagine a 'better worst' than hers would be—with everybody she 'cared about' being so 'darling' to her and so 'close at hand.'

"It was after this and other similar remarks had been reported to me that I asked Mrs. Morris to walk out into her garden with me one afternoon. We went to the very spot where she had tried to console me, nearly two years before, with her accounts of Laura Nell's practical jokes. It was in the late spring, this time, that we stood on the low terrace and looked back toward the house. Pink and white peonies were in bloom on the borders of the center path. There were red and white roses in the big square rose bed just below us. Jonquils and narcissuses had al-

ready gone, and the summer flowers were not in yet. There was no other color at all except the fresh verdure of the trees all around and the new foliage of the wisteria on the porch trellises. While we eyed the garden (both of us wishing, I believe, that we had the heart to speak of its beauty, or wishing that it were not so beautiful), I began to say mechanically the thing I had brought Mrs. Morris out there to hear. I cannot remember the words I used, but I told her that Laura Nell had once tried to tease me with the idea that there was some terrible family trait they all shared. I wondered if she knew what it was Laura Nell had in mind and, if so, would she be willing to tell me.

"She gazed at me at first without comprehension. And so then I went on to say that it was something her grandfather used to mention when anyone pointed out how different they all were from each other. Mrs. Morris' mouth fell open, and she stared at me as though I had spoken an obscenity. I believe I suffered more during the seconds that that lady's eyes were so fixed on me than I did at any other time. But the pain was of short duration. Mrs. Morris suddenly turned away, and I could see that she had brought her hands up to her face and that she was pressing her finger tips against her eyes as if to force back tears. I stepped toward her and put one arm about her. I half expected her to draw away, but when she didn't I took her in my arms and began trying to comfort her. That she permitted me to comfort her was the deepest consolation I could possibly have known. It was perhaps the most consoling moment of my adult life. It was as though my own parents had not been taken from me when I was only a boy really, as though I had had a sort of second chance that everyone wishes for with his mother. And presently she looked up at me and said, 'I can tell you what Laura Nell meant.' She was smiling now, and I knew from her voice that there would be no more tears. 'It was only a grim little joke that Laura Nell's grandfather used to make,' she said, 'and it is just like Laura Nell to have remembered it. He used to say that the Morrises were all alike in at least one respect: they all had to die some time or other. . . . A fairly trite

kind of joke, I used to think—and still think. I do apologize for having given way so just now.’

“We stayed in the garden a few minutes longer. Then we walked back between the peonies to the house, and I went away without going up to see Laura Nell again. Next morning I took the train back East.

“But ten days later I was there again. And now I resolved to carry through my original purpose. Seated at her bedside, I told Laura Nell that I had discovered what the Morrises’ dreadful failing was, and I gave proof of my knowledge. She lay with her eyes closed, and without making any sign that she understood me. But I continued, ‘I must remind you of your promise,’ I said. ‘Now you must get well so that you can keep your end of the bargain and marry me.’

“She opened her eyes and smiled at me. I was filled with hope, for I actually believed—had believed from the start—that my scheme might work. I had thought that the very fatuousness of what I was attempting might appeal to Laura Nell, and I believed that even while she lay there already so near death she still possessed resources that would enable her to respond to a challenge of that kind. It was impossible for me to believe otherwise. When I was persuading her parents and her doctors to grant me that last quarter-hour alone with her I concealed my purpose from them, but I think that they too believed I might work a magic with her.

“I took the frail hand that lay on the coverlet and was about to say more when she asked in a whisper, ‘Did you make you such a promise?’

“‘You did,’ I said. ‘Or that was how I understood you.’

“‘You did not want to make the bargain, though.’

“‘I had no choice.’

“‘But the condition—’ she whispered. ‘I made a condition.’

“I knew what she meant, and she saw at once that I did. And also at once I saw that she knew I had not met her condition.

“‘You asked someone what it was,’ she said.

“I nodded and bent down and kissed her hand in an effort to hide my face.

" 'Well, I forgive you anyway,' she said. 'I think I understand you better than in the old days. . . . It is a little frightening even at best. . . . Probably it is just as well always to run away from it.' Until that moment I had never understood what our differences were or realized how close we were to each other. But when I raised my head, her eyes were already closed, and I never saw them open again. . . . The doctors could not predict how long she might linger, and so I was not there at the end. The telegram saying that she had died came on the third of July. I went out to the funeral, of course, and when I returned to Washington my first assignment to a foreign post was awaiting me.

"For a number of years I corresponded with Mrs. Morris, and of course I always called on the family on the rare occasions when some matter of my property took me back there. This was not often, though, and I eventually got rid of all my interests that made the trips necessary. Gradually over the years I have lost touch with everyone there. None of them ever comes over here for any length of time except an occasional stray lamb like yourself. When they come, they come only as tourists or—nowadays—on flying business trips; and invariably the first question they have to ask a person like myself is, don't I ever get 'the least bit' homesick. What rot. What utter rot! It's something more than home *they're* sick for, if only they knew. *She* knew at the last. And knew it was no better to welcome and want the inevitable than to turn your back on it and let it overtake you when and wherever it will. I say they'd do better to stay at home altogether than to come the way they do. Their little tours abroad must be as painful to them as my little excursions back home were to me after Laura Nell was dead. But, anyhow, I seldom see them when they do come. In the profession that I followed, I learned at last not to complicate my life with entertaining the tourists."

The Last Rite

Lee Yu-Hwa

CHOU NAN-AN reached home before sunset. In the first courtyard he did not meet anyone. At the threshold of the second court his heart beat faster. The place looked unusually empty without his grandmother sitting in the low bamboo chair on the broad veranda. A pungent sensation crept up his nose. As long as he could remember she had been sitting there, rain or shine, ready to greet anyone who walked into the court. In his childhood this was the heart of the house. He was always sure that his grandmother would be there to receive him, and inside the wide folds of her sleeves, he would find cookies, candies or fruits of the season.

He ran through the stone-paved courtyard and up the few steps to the raised veranda. He was met by his mother who had just come out of the room to the right of the center altar room.

"Is she . . ." he asked.

She nodded and held him for a moment to look at him. She had not seen him in three years.

His grandmother's bedroom seemed full of silent women, her kinfolk, there to sit with her, according to custom, taking turns at night, until she either recovered or passed away in their loving care. The women all looked up when he entered. He followed his mother on tiptoe to the big built-in bed lit by an oil lamp on a nearby table. His grandmother was resting with her eyes closed. Her brown face was furrowed and her features sunken.

It seemed a long time before his grandmother stirred and asked for tea. Someone quickly handed his mother a

bowl of the pale clear reddish broth of dried dates, believed to have the power of fortifying a weakened life. His mother kneeled on the low bench in front of the bed to feed the broth to the old woman. The old woman drank the broth with her eyes closed. After a few spoonfuls she asked, "Has my son come home yet?"

"Not yet. Shio-An-Erh is here. He has come home to see you, grandma."

The old woman opened her eyes slowly. Chou's mother got up quickly and stepping back, pushed her son to the foreground. He knelt on the low bench and took his grandmother's hand.

"I am home, grandma."

"Shio-An-Erh, I did not think I would see you again. You took a long time to come home." She spoke slowly and with great effort, then she nodded agreeably and closed her eyes, her hand clasping his.

His grandmother fell asleep with his hand in hers. He patiently kept his kneeling pose so as not to disturb her sleep. He loved his grandmother more dearly than he did his parents. In his childhood his mother was always too busy with housework to play with him, and his father had always treated him in the traditional way, serving as his strict disciplinarian. His grandmother had for him all the leisure and the unrestrained affection privileged to grandparents. It was to his grandmother he had made his childish vows to love her always. The memories of these vows brought him back home to her bedside. Watching the old woman sleeping with a sweet smile on her face, he was glad that he had come home.

In her sleep his grandmother frowned, made a little frightened sound and grasped his hand hard as if she had had a bad dream. Chou patted her hand with his free hand. She opened her eyes with a far-away look and when she finally focused them on him, she smiled, "I knew you would come home, I told them so," she said, pleased and somewhat boastfully.

In the evening his father walked in, still in his street robe, and kneeled on the low bench to have a look at his grandmother who was now asleep. When his father got up, his eyes swept about the room for Chou. He nodded to Chou and went out.

Chou delayed as long as possible leaving his grandmother to go to his father as requested by that look. He had hoped that his grandmother would wake up in time to furnish an excuse for him to postpone seeing his father alone. But since his grandmother went on sleeping peacefully and his mother kept casting worried glances at him, he got up and left.

As he came down the steps of the raised veranda and drew close to his father's room, Chou became panicky. He had to check his impulse to run back to his grandmother's room, his sanctuary in childhood. He was seized by that old familiar fear that he was not going to be able to speak clearly. Words would get stuck in his throat as in the old days whenever his father shouted at him. And his conversation with his father had never failed to produce thunder.

Yet in the years he had been away he had come to see his father in a different light. His father was not, as he had thought, his tormentor, nor was his father so staunch a believer in the old system. He did not oppose the new ways and the new people for what they were. He had not really had a taste of the good old days under the rule of the emperor. Just under twenty when the revolution of 1911 broke out, he had never had the chance to take the Imperial Civil Service Examinations and be appointed to an office, the first proof of a man's ability in his time and the first reward for his years of diligent study. The overthrow of the emperor nipped his budding dream of a useful successful life. If the revolutionists had made Sun Yat-sen an emperor, things would have been fine, his father had often said. When Chou had been away from home, away from his father, he read a deeper meaning into this comment of his father's. His father did not really care that the emperor had been overthrown or that the revolution had taken place. All he wanted was that there should be another emperor to hold the world together which he was born to and educated for. This personal disappointment made him hostile to the new world and the new people of whom Chou was one. It was a very tragic thing that happened to his father; the revolution had reduced him from a young man with as big a future as he could make it to a man who spent his life taking

care of the family land. "A housekeeper," his father often called himself. When he understood this, Chou was sorry for his father and forgave him for the unfair treatment he had suffered at his hand.

During the last two days on the boat trip home Chou often thought that with this new understanding of his father he would have known how to handle him. In a way his father was like a disturbed youth who had not yet outgrown his young manhood's disappointment. Chou even went further towards this dream of reconciliation with his father. He had imagined many dialogues to convert his father, keyed to the various philosophical views of his father's that were familiar to him. Now in the grips of his fear to meet his father alone, he hoped only to summon enough courage to lift up the door drape and step over the threshold, let alone engage in conversation.

His father was in the study, actually the bookkeeping room where he went over the domestic accounts with the servants and kept no books worth reading. He had removed his street robe, rolled the sleeves of his white silk undergarment above the elbows, and was washing his face and hands in a porcelain basin. He dried his face with a plain cotton cloth. His eyes were bloodshot and his square jaw jutted out under the two strokes of a black mustache. He studied his son attentively.

Dinner was set in the center of a long table, at one end of which were a blue cloth-bound ledger, abacus, brushes and an inkstone. His father sat at the table and rolled down his sleeves. At a slight motion of his hand, Chou hurried forward to pour tea, holding the cup respectfully in both hands and at chest-level while his father took his time fastening the top button of his underjacket and gave his collar a few pulls to make it stand upright. When he took the cup his head bent a trifle to acknowledge the courtesy his son had shown him.

"Sit down," his father said as he picked up his chopsticks.

In the silent room the clinking of chinaware was exaggeratedly and uncomfortably loud. Chou sat straight on the edge of his chair. He wanted to lean back but could not move. His body seemed to be better disciplined than his mind; in the presence of his father, it behaved independ-

ently from his will, in compliance with his childhood training. He remained sitting respectfully on the edge of his chair.

His father did not seem to enjoy his dinner. He was absent-mindedly, absorbed in his own thoughts. Occasionally his eyes would rest on his son, but gave no indication of recognition. When he finished his dinner Chou, again according to custom, got up and poured him fresh tea. His father's intent stare made him tremble and spill some tea in the saucer.

"What did they teach you in the last three years?" his father asked, sipping his tea.

"English, chemistry, physics . . ."

Before he could finish recounting the curriculum, his father waved for him to stop. He was not impressed with the titles of these strange foreign studies.

"I mean what have you learned? What knowledge taught in the modern school?"

"It is complicated to explain . . ." The frown on his father's face cut Chou short. He paused and thought for a second. "In the modern school knowledge is much broader. The students are taught a general understanding of the cultures of various peoples and a fundamental knowledge of science—studies made on the natural aspects of the universe. And then the student proceeds to specialize in a branch of study chosen according to his interests and ability."

"Complicated and broader! Hern!" His father sneered. "What can be more complicated than to live the life of a man? Incidentally, in case they did not tell you this at school, let me tell you that the old-fashioned Chinese education teaches one to be a man."

Chou did not retort; again he had to face up to the impossibility of discussing anything with his father.

"We were taught our duties, duties to the emperor and duties to our parents. And we live by them." His father waited and then impatiently shouted, "What do you have to say for yourself?"

"Things are changing . . ." Chou faltered.

"What is changing and who does the changing? The same things go on: spring planting, fall harvest, rent collecting, paying taxes, feeding the family and going to

post office to send you money. Nothing is changing here."

Chou withdrew to greater depths of silence.

"You have been gone three years and you come home without having learned a thing. If good money was wasted to buy you common sense, I will teach you myself. The first duty you owe to me and to the old woman who is lying there dying, waiting for you, is to get yourself married. I do not want to remind you of the agony and humiliation you have inflicted upon your fiancée and her family because you do not understand—you never had any understanding."

"I cannot . . ." Chou's voice failed him in the middle of the sentence.

"I know. You never could do a good thing." His father snorted. "But you do not have to trouble yourself. I have taken care of everything, and I have checked the calendar, too. The day after tomorrow is a fair day and I only hope your grandmother can last that long to see you married." His father dismissed him with a wave of his hand.

Next morning after breakfast his sister came to see him. She filled in the details of the wedding arrangements. The family had been waiting for him to come home after the alarming telegram about their grandmother's illness had been sent to him. They had prepared everything, since it was also the grandmother's wish for him to get married on the first propitious day after his arrival. There would be no celebration or wedding party. These would follow either when his grandmother got well or on the hundredth day after her funeral. The east wing chambers were decorated as a bridal suite. From his room he could see that the windows were done up in red paper.

"Why are you so excited?" he said.

"I shall have someone to talk to and to sew with. She is so very nice, she really is."

"What do you know about her? You hardly ever had a chance to see her." Chou was surprised, since according to tradition his fiancée should not have come in contact with any member of his family until the wedding.

"But I do know her well," his sister said. "Since last year we have been going to the same school."

"School! What for?"

"What does anyone go to school for?" Her voice came quick and angry.

He ignored her anger, since they both knew his fiancée's purpose in obtaining an education was to raise her estimation of her.

"She wants me to give you this." His sister pointed to the package which she had put on his desk when she came in.

Shooting a glance at the tissue-wrapped package he said, "I cannot marry her. Doesn't anyone understand that is why I have not come home in three years?"

"What should she do?"

"It is not my concern."

"She is your fiancée."

"You, too! Have you forgotten what we used to talk about before I went away?"

"I remember. But I have grown up and understand things better. She is your fiancée, you have responsibilities towards her."

"Responsibilities and duties! That is all I have been hearing. And false responsibilities and duties at that! Of course, I have a great sense of responsibility and duty but only to myself, as an individual, and to a better future for mankind. My utmost responsibility and duty are to destroy your type of responsibility and duty."

"But why destroy her?"

"She must fight her own way out!"

"How?"

"First and foremost by freeing herself from this feudalistic culture, rejecting the teachings and patterns of life formed and arranged for her before she was born and then by firmly insisting on her individual rights."

"Do not make speeches! You are not on a platform," his sister said. "Just tell me how is she going to accomplish all this? She cannot set foot outside her house without her parents' permission."

"They have done a lot of harm to you. You have learned to yield and to compromise," Chou said regretfully. "I will take you with me this time when I leave. I shall introduce you to new friends who will help you consolidate your thinking."

For reply his sister looked at her bound feet. "Their feet are not like mine."

An awkward moment lapsed as Chou was reminded of this overlooked impediment to his sister's emancipation.

"Mind is more important than physical appearance. You must not let this small hindrance prevent you from living a full life."

"Without this small hindrance your fiancée would stand more of a chance to please you."

"Your mind is poisoned. I do not wish to marry her because she is not the type of woman I would choose." His voice was raised to the pitch of impatience and temper, characteristic of student debates. "I do not care for women who consider uppermost the task of pleasing their husbands."

"But you can teach her new ways and new ideas. She is just as bright and willing to learn as I am."

"It is not a question of my willingness to help her. I would like to help her if at the same time I can preserve my independence, my freedom and my integrity."

"I used to think new ways and people with new ideas were better. But now I am grateful that my fiancé does not mind my bound feet and wants to marry me." She burst into tears and ran out of the room.

His talk with his sister was not what he had expected. He had counted on her as a mediator between him and his parents. And if that were to fail, he had taken it for granted that she would help him run away.

His father had taken, as expected, the precaution of posting a servant near him. On the pretext of being waited upon, he found that he was not left alone. While he was in his room the servant stayed in the room next to his, and when he walked about the house, he was followed.

A servant brought him a silk robe and said that his father wished him to wear it. He removed his student's cotton suit. He came out to the courtyard, went up to the broad veranda and lingered a moment near his grandmother's chair, his early refuge. Thousands of times he had run here to enlist her power against unpleasant orders from his parents. He touched the worn arm of the

low chair and wished that once more his grandmother would exercise that authority on his behalf.

He sat down in her chair, the big square courtyard bare before his eyes. He saw every open and shut window and door and anyone who came in or went out of the gate. He realized that this was how the feeble old woman had participated in the activities of her household and knew so much about them.

His eyes dwelt upon the suite of three rooms at the upper end of the east chambers. How many hours, he asked himself, had his grandmother spent looking at the lattice windows and hoped to see them papered red.

His mother came out to the veranda and took the low roomy cushioned chair of the grandmother which he vacated for the stool that used to be his mother's.

"Grandmother is taking a nap. You have done her good. The doctor said this morning that her pulse is stronger."

"Good! Then we do not have to rush into this thing."

"It will be tomorrow. Your grandmother and father agreed," his mother said gravely. "It is not rushing. Your fiancée's getting to be an old maid. Eighteen years old and still she stays at home and braids her hair. Besides, there is your sister. You are holding up her wedding, too. Her fiancé's family is anxious to have a daughter-in-law."

"If I had known this, I would not have come home. No one cares about what happened to me."

His mother looked at him curiously and warily.

"No one wants to listen to me. I cannot marry this girl because I am already married. Now, do you understand?"

"Married," his mother repeated dubiously and then corrected him, "you mean you have taken a woman."

"I said I am married, married to a girl who goes to the same college with me."

"Ah, a modern girl," his mother said. She looked thoughtful. He waited impatiently for the serious nature of his marriage to penetrate her mind. "Do not tell your father," she said finally, "till this is over." She jutted her chin towards the red-papered lattice windows.

He walked angrily away from his mother. He had been away too long and had forgotten the paradoxical aspects

of their morality. Laxity and indulgence loopholed a rigid code of behavior. His mother's attitude represented that of his family. To divulge his marriage to them would not matter in the least so far as their preparations to celebrate his wedding were concerned. A marriage which was not arranged by the family was not a marriage. And a girl, despite her upbringing and the prestige of her family, was not respectable if she entered into marriage unauthorized and unrecognized by the families of both sides. The most his wife could hope for was to come and beg humbly for recognition as his second wife.

His talk with his mother ended all hope of understanding from his family. Were he to tell his father of his marital status, his father would ignore him and send him tomorrow anyhow, on schedule, in a green sedan to bring home his childhood betrothed.

He had not written his family earlier of his marriage because he had thought it was the only way to avoid a break in relations—his father would instantly have cabled back cutting off his allowance and threatening to disown him. But as he now realized, it was a dimly felt distrust of his family that had prevented him from announcing the marriage. The repercussions of this great offense and disobedience, he must have subconsciously felt, would be more than disinheritance. His marriage could not alter the fact, in his parents' eyes, that he, their son, was meant to fit in their scheme of things and should be brought around to marry the girl they had engaged him to in his childhood. And his father was capable and unscrupulous. He had not been able to score an easy victory over him.

In the evening Chou had dinner with his cousins. One of them brought along a jug of wine. The excuse for their merry-making was that their grandmother rejoiced in it, too. After dinner, they all crowded into the grandmother's room. The old woman looked over the Chou descendants and signaled Chou to come forward. He knelt on the low bench, but his grandmother gestured for him to sit on the edge of her bed.

"They say I have spoiled you, but I know you will make up for everything. I will hang on—" she pointed in

mid-air as if her life were being dispersed there, "tomorrow."

"Do not talk like that! You will live for many, many years yet."

Tears rushed down Chou's cheeks.

"Not many years but . . ." The old woman paused to gather strength and smiled sweetly at her last wish. "The last banquet and all the friends and relatives to celebrate it."

Chou nodded; he had lost his voice.

He was sent to sleep in his own room and did not stop up to care for the sick woman. The lingering effects of the dinner wine made him sleep soundly.

In the morning when he woke up he noticed the package on the desk. He picked it up and opened it. It was an embroidered writing brush-holder, a pet souvenir women gave to men. Inside the brush-holder he found a letter from his fiancée. She acknowledged her awareness of his reluctance to marry her, begged for tolerance and thanked him for being merciful to allow her to assume her name. "I know only," she wrote, "of the traditional way of living. I shall be obedient to you as I am obedient to my parents. And I shall not question the propriety of anything you do since I cannot question what I do not understand."

He put the letter aside and concluded that she was a cunning woman. She pleaded for his sympathy and affection and at the same time hinted that he was free; she would not hold him to the conventional responsibilities of a husband.

There was much activity in the suite with the red-velvet lattice windows. The door was open and the windows propped up. The servants kept going in and out.

After his visit to his grandmother he was sent to bathe and dress in formal gowns. At the propitious hour he was carried in a green sedan to his bride's house and came home followed by her red sedan. They held a simple ceremony without music. Afterwards, when they went to the grandmother's room, the sick old woman was propped up on pillows to receive them. Chou's parents stood by the bed and behind them stood the uncles, aunts and cousins. The crowded room was hushed; only

sound of the dangling pearls of the bride's headdress and the rustling of her stiff brocade were heard when they kowtowed to the grandmother.

During dinner he drank rounds of drinks with his cousins. Tottering, he was helped into the bridal chamber. He sat down in a red-lacquered armchair by a long red-lacquered table on which two thick red columnar candles were burning. The candles were to last out the night. So was the oil lamp under the bed. They were symbols of their long life together. Placed around the oil lamp were five kinds of nuts, symbolic of their prosperity. A red silk quilt was spread on the bed. His bride, still in her wedding gown, sat on the edge of the bed, her head bowed a little. A servant brought in strong tea, good for sobering up, and fastened the door on the outside. Chou drank two cups of tea.

"Go to sleep," he said to the girl who sat so still amidst the blazing red of the room. This was the one thing they could not force him to do, he said to himself. Yung-Chu, his wife by choice, might understand, he persuaded himself, if he held out at the last step and proved that he gave in to his family only on superficial grounds. He fulfilled his obligation to them as their son to take this woman into their house to be their daughter-in-law. She was as much his wife as he was their son, by circumstances and not by affection or choice.

Besides there was no other way for him to leave home and to go back to the city except through this compromise. But compromise was one word that Yung-Chu was afraid of. One compromise led to another. She had often warned him. She, too, was a student from a distant county who had come to the city to study. Like many young people around her, she lived as though she had no family and no awareness of the society around her. She cared for her approval of herself and for the approval of those who shared similar rebellious thoughts with her. When he first knew her, he was awed and, in turn, admired her for her advanced views and her resolution and courage to act upon them. When she found herself responding to his love, she came to live with him. There was no fuss and no bother about the significance of their union in relation to society. She did not tell him whether

she had written her family about her marriage nor did she inquire about what he had done concerning his. The Chinese family, to her, was the remnant of a bankrupt society and the last restraint to young Chinese attempting to find a new life for themselves. When he showed her the telegram about his grandmother's illness, she merely looked at him, offended, and said in a challenging tone "You must deal with it yourself. It is your own affair."

Chou understood and approved of his wife's attitude but at the same time he could not pretend that he was not hurt by it nor could he pretend that it was easy to live with a woman who constantly imposed upon themselves such unprecedented views. With her he had had some of the grandest moments of his life. Their visions of life conveyed him to a state in which he believed that life as it ought to be was within their reach, and they and their friends, undamaged and unspoiled by society, were the ones to live this good life, although in reality his life with Yung-Chu was very painful. When they were not talking about ideas, they seemed to be lost. They did not know how to do the least little thing without getting into a serious argument with each other. She refused to be addressed as Mrs. Chou, using only her own name, Lu Yung-Chu, if she had to assume a family name, and as a result involved themselves in needless and endless explanations to the conventional. She did the cooking and cleaning one week and he did it the next. This judicious distribution of housework afforded a good source of friction and Yung-Chu fought vigorous and valiant battles against the opposite sex in her own home. But all in all she was the woman he loved and valued and he had admitted that his conventional male prerogatives were much at fault for the difficulties in his life with a woman like Yung-Chu. There was no doubt in his mind that she was the woman he wanted to go back to and the life with her was what he had chosen through his own free will.

Turning his chair away from the woman dressed in red who sat on the bed spread with red silk, he cushioned his head with his folded arms on the table and calculated the earliest possible date when he could leave. His grandmother was expected to die within a few days—the family had prepared for his wedding in the first and second

main courts while in the third court preparations for the funeral went on steadily. In that case he had no choice but to wait till she died. But if the doctor gave a contrary prediction, then he would leave as soon as he could persuade his parents of his urgent desire to go back to school. He expected them to be lenient since he had compromised in marrying this woman, even though his father had hinted that he needed someone to help him manage the family estate and that his son had had enough education. Chou took this as another outburst of his father's hostility toward the new world; without the emperor there was no career worthwhile for a man to work at.

The sooner he could get back to the city, the better chance Chou had to explain to Yung-Chu what had happened. It would not be an easy task. He did not see how he could manage to convey to her his intricate relationship with his family, no more than he could explain to his family how he and Yung-Chu had been thinking and living. In some ways Yung-Chu was just as dogmatic as his father. She would judge him harshly and call his sympathy and love for his family cowardice. If she should condemn him as a coward and renegade to their ideas, she would leave him. She and the friends they both had were, so he often felt even when he was with them, like the mules in a mill; they wore blinders in order to pursue without distraction their singleminded purpose of finding a new pattern of living for China. They would have wanted him to ignore, to destroy and to deny his feelings for everybody in this house where an old woman lay dying and a young girl waited to be made into a woman. But he did have feelings for them all, even for this girl whom he had just turned his back on. He was responsible for her, as his sister had said. If he did not go to take her home in the red sedan today he would have abandoned her to the sad life of an old maid. She would never be able to marry again and would be disgraced all her life through no fault of her own.

He turned around and saw that his bride had not moved. She sat in exactly the same pose, almost a part of the red decorations of the room, as though she were

going to sit there guarding the edge of the bed throughout the night.

The red candles flickered and he had an impulse to blow them out. But this would have given alarm if someone were watching his windows.

"Go to sleep," he said.

The girl in red did not move.

Fine obedience! Chou was getting angry at her. It was not only his name she wanted, she was waiting for him to lift her headdress, to exercise his right as her husband.

"I said go to sleep!"

She trembled but made no move. The pearl curtain and her jeweled headdress was shaking. He went to her and parted the strings of pearls hanging down from her headdress. She was weeping quietly. Her eyes were downcast and tears were streaming down her powdered and rouged cheeks. She looked exceedingly beautiful in the candlelight.

He let fall the strings of pearls and walked away from her. He knew that she was worrying about the next morning's questioning by her mother-in-law of the evidence of premarital chastity. He went back to her and took off her jeweled headdress. She had not raised her eyes but her tears had stopped, her lips were parted slightly and her rouge on her cheeks had deepened in color. His hand touched her black silky hair, which, for the first time in her life, was combed back and knotted into a chignon and he felt for the essential gold pin that held the chignon in place. When he pulled the gold pin her hair fell loose and hung down her back, scattering the rest of the ornamental jeweled pins on the embroidered red silk quilt.

Biographical Notes

L. J. AMSTER was born and brought up in New York City and lives there today. He has worked as a writer and publicist for newspapers, radio, motion pictures in both Hollywood and New York, and television. Some of his fiction has been published in now-defunct little magazines and his essays have appeared in national journals. Ten years ago he began a new career as a medical writer, and in his spare time he is finishing a novel and adapting another novel for the stage.

DANIEL DE PAOLA was born in Newark, New Jersey, and has lived there all his life, except for three years in the Army during World War II. After a year at Rutgers on the G.I. Bill, he held a variety of jobs, ranging from clerk to truck driver, while learning to write. Since the late fifties, he has had a dozen stories printed in magazines such as *Colorado Quarterly*, *Arizona Quarterly*, and *Queen's Quarterly* of Canada. He is currently at work on a novel.

STANLEY ELKIN was born in New York City and raised in Chicago. He obtained his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in English at the University of Illinois. During 1964-65, he was Visiting Lecturer in English at Smith College. He is now an Assistant Professor at Washington University, St. Louis. Random House brought out his novel, *Boswell*, in 1964 and will be publishing a collection of his stories, *Criers and Kibitzers*, *Kibitzers and Criers* early in 1966. He is at work on a second novel. In 1965 stories by Mr. Elkin have appeared in *Esquire*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *Paris Review*.

JACK GILCHRIST was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1924 and attended Georgia Southwestern College in Americus. For

the past ten years he has been in public relations work; for the previous ten years he worked on a newspaper. "Opening Day" is his first attempt at fiction. Mr. Gilchrist lives in an Atlanta suburb.

JAMES W. GROSHONG was born in Corvallis, Oregon, and he now lives and works there as Professor of English at Oregon State University, where his professional specialty is the English novel. A veteran of World War II, he received his B.A. and Ph.D. degrees at Stanford. He is married and the father of three children. Presently he is at work on three novels which are in various stages of development.

MARTIN J. HAMER was raised in Harlem and has since lived in every borough of New York City except Staten Island. He now works as an electromechanical designer and is an evening student at the City College of New York, where he is majoring in psychology.

MAUREEN HOWARD was born and brought up in Bridgeport, Connecticut. She worked in publishing and advertising in New York after graduation from Smith College and now lives in New Jersey. She and her husband, who is Associate Professor of English at Rutgers University, have one daughter. Mrs. Howard's articles and short stories have appeared in *The Yale Review*, *The Hudson Review*, *O. Henry Prize Stories 1962* and *The Kenyon Review*. She is the author of two novels, *Not a Word About Nightingales* (1962) and the recently published *Bridgeport Bus*.

DONALD HUTTER, who was born in London in 1932, spent his first six years in Europe, then settled in the United States. After receiving a B.A. from Princeton and serving two years with the Army in Korea, he went to work at Charles Scribner's Sons in 1957 where he has since been an editor. The author of a children's book, *Abraham*, published in 1947, he has also had a story published in *The Ladies' Home Journal*. He and his wife and three daughters live in New Canaan, Connecticut.

HENIA KARMEL-WOLFE was born in Poland, where the war interrupted her schooling. She spent the war years in various concentration camps and it was there that she first started writing. A book of her poems was published in Polish upon her arrival in America in 1948. She began writing in English in 1962 and her first story, published

by the *Reporter*, was included in *The Best American Short Stories 1962*. Another of her stories appeared in *Harper's Magazine*. "The Month of His Birthday" is her third published story. A mother of two, she lives in Riverdale, New York, and is presently working on a novel.

MARY LAVIN, the author of many short stories, lives on a farm in County Meath, Ireland, and also has a town house, a converted coach house, in Dublin. A widow with three daughters, Miss Lavin was born in East Walpole, Massachusetts, and educated in Ireland, receiving her M.A. from the National University of Ireland in Dublin. In 1960 and 1962 she was the holder of a Guggenheim Fellowship. A collection of her stories, many of them taken from her previous books, was published in 1959 under the title *Selected Stories*. Of her life since her last appearance in *The Best American Short Stories 1962*, Miss Lavin says, "The only change, alas, is that I get older, I suppose, and that I write more stories."

DENNIS LYNDY was born in St. Louis, Missouri, where his father, an actor, was appearing with a show. Since then he has lived in England, Canada, Colorado, California and New York. In the Infantry during World War II, Mr. Lynds has a B.A. from Hofstra College and an M.A. from Syracuse University. He has worked as a chemist, and as an editor on various chemical magazines. At present he is a full-time free-lance writer doing chemical articles, novels, and stories. One of his mystery stories will appear in *Best Detective Stories of 1965*. He has had two novels, *Combat Soldier* and *Uptown Downtown*, published, as well as stories in quite a few of the literary magazines. He is now at work on three novels. Mr. Lynds has recently moved to California with his wife and children.

FREDERIC MORTON, the author of the best-selling biography *The Rothschilds* (1963), was born in Vienna in 1925, emigrating to London in 1939, and thence to New York. He received a B.S. in chemistry in 1947 and also wrote his first novel that same year. After taking an M.A. in philosophy at the New School for Social Research, he wrote his second novel and began to teach English on the graduate and undergraduate levels at various universities. A regular contributor to *Holiday* magazine since 1954, Mr. Morton also reviews books for *The New York Times*

and the New York *Herald Tribune*. At the moment he is writing another novel, some short fiction for *Playboy*, and a social history of Europe's luxury resorts, which is first appearing serially in *Holiday*.

JAY NEUGEBORN, a teacher at Columbia University, was born and brought up in Brooklyn. He received his B.A. from Columbia and his M.A. from Indiana. He has had articles and stories in magazines such as *The Transatlantic Review*, *The Colorado Quarterly*, and *The New Republic*. He and his wife live in New York City. He has just completed a novel and is starting another. He is also working on a collection of short stories about a group of boys growing up in Brooklyn, the first of which will appear shortly in *The Transatlantic Review*.

JOYCE CAROL OATES has had stories published in *The Kenyon Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Mademoiselle*, *Cosmopolitan*, *MSS*, *Prairie Schooner*, as well as other magazines. Her work has also appeared in the O. Henry Awards anthology for 1963, 1964, 1965, and *The Best American Short Stories* for 1963 and 1964. Her first book of stories was published in 1963, a novel in 1964, and another story collection, *Upon the Sweeping Flood*, will be published later this year by Vanguard. She and her husband live in Detroit.

LEONARD WALLACE ROBINSON was born in Malden, Massachusetts, and went to Dean Academy, Columbia College, and to graduate school at the New School of Social Research, majoring in sociology. He has worked on the staff of *The New Yorker* as a reporter-writer, and has been managing editor of *Esquire* magazine, fiction editor of *Collier's*, and executive editor at Henry Holt and Company. The author of several short stories in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Esquire* and *Mademoiselle*, he lives with his wife and son, a freshman at Columbia, in New York City.

ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER was born in Poland in 1904 and published short stories in Yiddish and Hebrew before coming to New York in 1935. The son and grandson of rabbis, Mr. Singer writes in Yiddish and his sketches and stories appear in the *Jewish Daily Forward*. His works have also appeared in *Mademoiselle*, *Midstream*, *Esquire*, *Partisan Review* and other national magazines. Among his

published books are *The Family Moskat*, *Satan in Goray*, *Gimpel the Fool*, *The Magician of Lublin*, *The Spinoza of Market Street*, *The Slave* and *The Manor*. "A Sacrifice" is a selection from his most recent book, *In My Father's Court*, published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc. In 1958 Mr. Singer was awarded a grant by the American Academy and National Institute of Arts and Letters. He also won the Louis Lamed Prize for *The Family Moskat*.

ROBERT SOMERLOTT, after ten years of political ghostwriting and turning out commercial press copy, moved to a small Mexican village in order to concentrate on his writing of fiction. During the first year, ten of his stories were accepted by national magazines, including *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Cosmopolitan*. He is now completing his first novel under contract with Little, Brown and Company. He was born and educated in the Middle West, but Mexico is his adopted country.

ELIZABETH SPENCER, best known for her novel *The Light in the Piazza* (1960), is also the author of the recently published *Knights and Dragons*, *The Voice at the Back Door* (1956) and two other novels. Born in Mississippi, she attended Belhaven College and acquired her M.A. at Vanderbilt University. A former newspaper-woman and teacher, she has contributed many short stories to magazines and collections. She won the first McGraw-Hill Fiction Award in 1960 and was a Bryn Mawr College Donnelly Fellow in 1962. She has spent a number of years in Italy and now lives in Canada with her husband, who runs a language school there.

JEAN STAFFORD was born in California and reared and educated in Colorado. She spent a year in Germany after college, then taught in Missouri for a year. Since then she has lived in Massachusetts, Louisiana, Tennessee, Maine, Connecticut and New York City, where she lives today. She has written three novels and two volumes of short stories, *Children Are Bored on Sunday* (1953) and *Bad Characters* (1964), and is currently at work on a new novel. Miss Stafford's short stories have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue*, *Holiday*, *The Reporter*, and many other magazines.

GERALD STEIN is the pseudonym of a man in his late thirties, and "For I Have Wept" is his first published story.

He has since had stories appear in *Contact* and *Redbook*. Married, with three children, he lives in northern New Jersey and works full-time at a blue-collar job and part-time as a vending-machine operator, used-car salesman, and short-story writer. Born in New York City, he lived in Brooklyn for a large part of his childhood and attended St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland. He served as a reporter in the Army in postwar Europe, and since then has lived in Israel and Indiana.

PETER TAYLOR was born in Tennessee in 1917 and grew up in Tennessee and Missouri. He now lives in North Carolina where he teaches a course in creative writing at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. His latest book was a collection of stories, *Miss Leonora When Last Seen*. He has just written a long play called *The Girl from Forkéd Deer*.

LEE YU-HWA has written a novel and eight short stories, but "The Last Rite" is her first published work. Another story, "The Scholar's Woman," has just appeared in *The Massachusetts Review*. She was born in Kunming, China, and took her degree in foreign literature at Southwest Associated Universities in Kunming. She came to the United States in 1946 and received her M.A. in English literature from the University of Pennsylvania. She now lives in Newtown Square, Pennsylvania, and is completing her second novel.

The
YEARBOOK
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AMERICAN SHORT STORY
January 1 to December 31, 1964

Roll of Honor, 1964

I. American Authors

AMSTER, L. J.—Center of Gravity. Saturday Evening Post, March 14.

BACAS, CHARLES—The Lost Days. Massachusetts Review, Spring.

BALLARD, JAMES—Good Master, What Shall I Do? University Review, Autumn.

BERRIAULT, GINA—The Birthday Party. Saturday Evening Post, Dec. 19-26.

COMBS, PRENTISS—The Wind Devil. Playboy, June.

CURLEY, DANIEL—Love in the Winter. Colorado Quarterly, Winter.

DEASY, MARY—The Fortune Teller. Saturday Evening Post, May 16.

DE PAOLA, DANIEL—The Returning. Prairie Schooner, Spring.

DONOHUE, H. E. F.—Farewell! Farewell! Saturday Evening Post, Jan. 25.

ELKIN, STANLEY—The Transient. Saturday Evening Post, April 25.

ENRIGHT, ELIZABETH—Out of Darkness. Redbook, Oct.

FRIEDMAN, SANFORD—Ocean. Partisan Review, Winter.

GALLANT, MAVIS—An Autobiography. New Yorker, Feb. 1.

GARRETT, GEORGE—My Pretty Birdie, Birdie in My Cage. Shenandoah, Winter.

HALL, DONALD—Christmas Snow. New Yorker, Dec. 26.

HAMER, MARTIN J.—Sarah. Atlantic, Jan.

HOOD, HUGH—The Good Tenor Man. Colorado Quarterly, Winter.

HOWARD, MAUREEN—Sherry. Hudson Review, Autumn.

HUTTER, DONALD—A Family Man. Saturday Evening Post, Feb. 22.

KARMEL-WOLFE, HENIA—The Month of His Birthday. Made-moiselle, Dec.

LAVIN, MARY—Heart of Gold. New Yorker, June 27.

LICHT, FRED S.—Stréga. Virginia Quarterly, Autumn.

LYNDS, DENNIS—A Blue Blonde in the Sky over Pennsylvania. Hudson Review, Summer.

MAHER, JAMES T.—The House Gift. Saturday Evening Post, March 7.

MORTON, FREDERIC—The Guest. Hudson Review, Winter.

MOSTERT, NOEL—A Christmas Dinner. Harper's Magazine, Dec.

MCHANEY, TOM—The Piercing Whistle Syndrome. Reflections, Spring.

NEUGEBOREN, JAY—The Application. Transatlantic Review, Oct.

OATES, JOYCE CAROL—First Views of the Enemy. Prairie Schooner, Spring.

O'CONNOR, EDWIN—One Spring Morning. Atlantic, Dec.

PYNCHON, THOMAS—The Secret Integration. Saturday Evening Post, Dec. 19-26.

RANDAL, VERA—Alice Blaine. New Yorker, July 4.

ROBINSON, LEONARD WALLACE—The Practice of an Art. Saturday Evening Post, Sept. 5.

ROOKE, LEON—The Strange Affair of Reno Brown and Mama Tuddi. Epoch, Fall.

SHAFTER, JOHN—Opening Day. Georgia Review, Spring.

SINGER, ISAAC BASHEVIS—A Sacrifice. Harper's Magazine, Feb.

SOMERLOTT, ROBERT—Eskimo Pies. Atlantic, Jan.

SPENCER, ELIZABETH—The Visit. Prairie Schooner, Summer.

STAFFORD, JEAN—The Ordeal of Conrad Pardee. Ladies'

- Home Journal, July. The Tea Time of Stouthearted Ladies. Kenyon Review, Winter.
- STEIN, GERALD—For I Have Wept. Saturday Evening Post, Jan. 4-11.
- STERN, RICHARD—Wanderers. Transatlantic Review, Oct.
- SULLIVAN, RICHARD—Some Sins of My Past Life. Critic, Apr.-May.
- TAYLOR, PETER—There. Kenyon Review, Winter.
- WILSON, ROSALIND—The Shells. Ladies' Home Journal, March.
- YU-HWA, LEE—The Last Rite. Literary Review, Summer.

II. *Foreign Authors*

- DAVIES, RHYS—I Will Keep Her Company. New Yorker, Jan. 4.
- HOUSEHOLD, GEOFFREY—The Battle of Mussolini. Atlantic, Sept.
- KIELY, BENEDICT—A Bottle of Brown Sherry. Kenyon Review, Spring.

Distinctive Short Stories in American Magazines, 1964

I. *American Authors*

- AMSTER, L. J.—Center of Gravity. Saturday Evening Post, March 6.
- BACAS, CHARLES—The Lost Days. Massachusetts Review, Spring.
- BAIL, JAY—The Game Hour. Esquire, March.
- BALLARD, JAMES—Man Overboard. Atlantic, Dec. Good Master, What Shall I Do? University Review, Autumn.
- BERGER, THOMAS—How the West Was Lost. Esquire, March.
- BERRIAULT, GINA—The Birthday Party. Saturday Evening Post, Dec. 19-26.
- BINGHAM, SALLY—Neighbors. Atlantic, March.
- BLEI, NORBERT—A Quiet. Trace, May.
- BOLES, ROBERT—The Flowers of Sorrow. New Yorker, Oct. 17.
- BRENNAN, MAEVE—A Free Choice. New Yorker, July 11.
- BROWN, MARY FINNIN—O the Days of the Kerry Dancing. Redbook, March.

- CANZONERI, ROBERT—The Peak of the Ritual. Epoch, Fall.
- CHARYN, JEROME—God Bless Captain Freddy and Private Ming. Mademoiselle, Apr.
- CHEEVER, JOHN—The Habit. New Yorker, March 7.
- COHANE, JOHN PHILIP—The Monster. Mademoiselle, Jan.
- COHEN, MARVIN—My Friend. Hudson Review, Spring.
- COLES, D. L.—A Door in the River. Tamarack Review, Summer.
- COMBS, PRENTISS—The Wind Devil. Playboy, June.
- CONNELL, EVAN S.—The Mountains of Guatemala. Esquire, Dec.
- CURLEY, DANIEL—Love in the Winter. Colorado Quarterly, Winter.
- DEASY, MARY—The Fortune Teller. Saturday Evening Post, May 16.
- DE PAOLA, DANIEL—The Returning. Prairie Schooner, Spring.
- DE VRIES, PETER—Our Revels Now Are Ended. Ladies Home Journal, March.
- DEMPSEY, DAVID—The Offering. Saturday Evening Post, March 28.
- DÖNER, DEAN—Giving. New Yorker, Feb. 15.
- DONOHUE, H. E. F.—Farewell! Farewell! Saturday Evening Post, Jan. 25.
- ENRIGHT, ELIZABETH—Out of Darkness. Redbook, Oct.
- EPSTEIN, SEYMOUR—Each Man in His Time. Redbook, Nov.
- EULERT, DON—Reflections in the Sky. Prairie Schooner, Spring.
- FRIEDMAN, SANFORD—Ocean. Partisan Review, Winter.
- GARRETT, GEORGE—My Pretty Birdie, Birdie in My Cage. Shenandoah, Winter.
- GASPER, SAMUEL—The Cossack. Ararat, Summer.
- GERBER, MERRILL JOAN—A Night Out. Redbook, Nov.
- GROSHONG, JAMES W.—The Gesture. Antioch Review, Summer.
- HALL, DONALD—Christmas Snow. New Yorker, Feb. 26.
- HAMER, MARTIN J.—Sarah. Atlantic, Jan.
- HART, JANE—Handful of Earth. Georgia Review, Winter.

- HOOD, HUGH—The Good Tenor Man. Colorado Quarterly, Winter.
- HOWARD, MAUREEN—Sherry. Hudson Review, Autumn.
- HUTTER, DONALD—A Family Man. Saturday Evening Post, Feb. 22.
- JACOBSEN, JOSEPHINE—The Day of the Dancers. Prairie Schooner, Summer.
- KARMEL-WOLFE, HENIA—The Month of His Birthday. Mademoiselle, Dec.
- KOUMJIAN, VAUGHN—The Wild Deuce. Ararat, Winter.
- LAURENCE, MARGARET—A Queen in Thebes. Tamarack Review, Summer.
- LAVIN, MARY—Heart of Gold. New Yorker, June 27.
- LIGHT, FRED S.—Strega. Virginia Quarterly, Autumn.
- LOFTS, NORAH—The Shepherd. Ladies' Home Journal, Dec.
- LYNDS, DENNIS—A Blue Blonde in the Sky over Pennsylvania. Hudson Review, Summer.
- McHANEY, TOM—The Piercing Whistle Syndrome. Reflections, Spring.
- MACQUARRIE, LEA—Alicia: A Love Story. Sound, May-June.
- MAHER, JAMES T.—The House Gift. Saturday Evening Post, March 7.
- MAJOR, J. W., JR.—My Mother Is Honey. Epoch, Spring.
- MALOFF, SAUL—The Price of a Carabao. Saturday Evening Post, Jan. 25.
- MAYER, TOM—A Minute Forty Seven of the Second. Harper's Magazine, March. The Phone Call. New Yorker, May 30.
- MAYHALL, JANE—Picture Window. Epoch, Fall.
- MORTON, FREDERIC—The Guest. Hudson Review, Winter. Velvet and Apollo. Playboy, Dec.
- MOSTERT, NOEL—A Christmas Dinner. Harper's Magazine, Dec.
- NEUGEBORN, JAY—The Application. Transatlantic Review, Oct.
- NISSONSON, HUGH—A Pile of Stones. Esquire, May
- OATES, JOYCE CAROL—First Views of the Enemy. Prairie Schooner, Spring.

O'CONNOR, EDWIN—One Spring Morning. Atlantic, Dec.
O'HARA, JOHN—The Victim. Saturday Evening Post, Mar.
14.

PAGANI, DAVID LEE—The Decoy. Trace, May.

PAULK, WILLIAM—Nunc et in Hora Mortis. Georgia Review
Spring.

PETRAKIS, HARRY MARKS—The Eyes of Love. Cavalier, Jan.

POTTER, N. A. J.—The Collection. Colorado Quarterly
Spring.

PRUETT, PAULA—Jessica. Sound, May-June.

PYNCHON, THOMAS—The Secret Integration. Saturday Evening
Post, Dec. 19-26.

RANDAL, VERA—Alice Blaine. New Yorker, July 4.

REDFORD, POLLY—The Swimming Pool. Georgia Review
Winter.

ROBINSON, LEONARD WALLACE—The Practice of an A
Saturday Evening Post, Sept. 5.

ROGIN, GILBERT—Judging Keller. New Yorker, March

ROOKE, LEON—Jones' End. Reflections, Spring. The Stran
Affair of Reno Brown and Mama Tuddi. Epoch, F

ROUECHÉ, BERTON—The Key. New Yorker, May 2.

SAYRES, WILLIAM—Adam's Apple. Georgia Review, Spring

SCHORER, PETER—Deacon's Show. Southwest Review, W
ter.

SCHWEIBOLD, J. M.—Never a Grain of Shaft Escapes
Scythe. University Review, Autumn.

SHAFTER, JOHN—Opening Day. Georgia Review, Spring

SHAW, IRWIN—Once in Aleppo. Playboy, Dec.

SINGER, ISAAC BASHEVIS—A Sacrifice. Harper's Magazi
Feb.

SMYTHE, GEORGE W.—The View from the Two Hotels. Sou
west, Winter.

SOMERLOTT, ROBERT—Eskimo Pies. Atlantic, Jan.

SPEICHER, JOHN F.—The Great Crown Rumble. Saturday E
ning Post, Jan. 4-11.

SPENCER, ELIZABETH—Ship Island. New Yorker, Sept.
The Visit. Prairie Schooner, Summer.

STAFFORD, JEAN—The Ordeal of Conrad Pardee. Lad
Home Journal, July. The Tea Time of Stouthearted Lad
Kenyon Review, Winter.

- STEIBER, RAYMOND—The Lost Indemnity. Trace, 1964.
- STEIN, GERALD—For I Have Wept. Saturday Evening Post, Jan. 4-11.
- STERN, RICHARD—Wanderers. Transatlantic Review, Oct.
- STUART, JESSICA JANE—Vianella. Arizona Quarterly, Autumn.
- SULLIVAN, RICHARD—Some Sins of My Past Life, Critic, Apr.-May.
- TAUBE, MYRON—Epstein. University Review. Autumn.
- TAYLOR, PETER—There. Kenyon Review, Winter.
- TEKEYAN, CHARLES—The Hunchback of Rotten Dock. Epoch, Spring. Naked in His Time. Trace, 1964.
- TERZIAN, KATHRYN—As If to Say Something. Ararat, Summer.
- UPDIKE, JOHN—At a Bar in Charlotte Amalie. New Yorker, Jan. 11.
- WEST, JESSAMYN—Hunting for Hoot Owls. Harper's Magazine, Jan.
- WHEATCROFT, JOHN—Sunday Breakfast. Epoch, Spring.
- WILSON, ROSEMARY—The Shells. Ladies' Home Journal, March.
- WOOD, MALCOLM—What Really Matters. Saturday Evening Post, May 16.
- YU-HWA, LEE—The Last Rite. Literary Review, Summer.

II. *Foreign Authors*

- ABILGAARD, OVE—Glimpses of a Childhood. Literary Review, Autumn.
- ARPINO, GIOVANNI—The Peacock. Esquire, Nov.
- BODELSEN, ANDERS—Anything Goes. Literary Review, Autumn.
- BOWMAN, RUSSELL—The Peggy. Evidence, No. 88.
- BRANDT, JERGEN GUSTAVA—A Stroll on Amager's South Beach. Literary Review, Autumn.
- DAVIE, ELSPETH—Sunday Class. Transatlantic Review, Oct.
- DAVIES, RHYS—I Will Keep Her Company. New Yorker, Jan. 4.
- DELIUS, ANTHONY—The Tootsis and the Fondos. New Yorker, Feb. 1.
- DURRELL, LAWRENCE—Sauve Qui Peut. Playboy, Dec.

- GLANVILLE, BRIAN—The Twins. Saturday Evening Post, Jan.
Roses in Burnt Oak. Mademoiselle, June.
- GREENE, GRAHAM—The Root of All Evil. Saturday Evening Post, March 7.
- HANSEN, MARTIN A.—The Morning Hour. Literary Review, Autumn.
- HOUSEHOLD, GEOFFREY—The Battle of Mussolini. Atlantic, Sept.
- KIELY, BENEDICT—A Bottle of Brown Sherry. Kenyon Review, Spring.
- MEACOCK, NORMA—Changed. Transatlantic Review, Oct.
- MELO, JUAN VINCENTE—The Hidden Signs. Atlantic, March.
- NEGIG, SHEILA—A Pot of Soothing Herbs. Kenyon Review, Spring.
- PERERA, PADMA—Too Late for Anger. New Yorker, Jan. 25.
- REUBEN, B.—Monkeys on the Hill of God. Transatlantic Review, Oct.
- REY, SYDOR—Portrait Without a Face. Transatlantic Review, Oct.
- RULFO, JUAN—The Hill of the Comadres. Atlantic, March.
- SENESI, MAURO—Father and Son. Atlantic, Feb.
- SONDERBERY, KNUD—An Inn in Jutland.
- TREVOR, WILLIAM—A Meeting in Middle Age. Transatlantic Review, Oct.
- WAHL, BETTY—A Shorter History of the Irish People. Kenyon Review, Spring.
- WARNER, SYLVIA TOWNSEND—Reparation. New Yorker, Feb. 29. The Long Night. New Yorker, May 2. The Three Cats. New Yorker, May 30.
- WEGNER, KURT—The Golden Helmet. Western Humanities Review, Fall.

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